THE ENACTMENT OF SETTING IN SECONDARY SCHOOL PE: TEACHER AND PUPIL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the policy of setting is interpreted and enacted by physical education [PE] teachers and examines the impact of this enactment on pupils. The work of Michel Foucault and Stephen Ball informed examination of the ways in which these processes are influenced by school-specific factors, such as reputation, buildings and PE teachers' biographies, as well as power relations and features of contemporary education policy contexts. The study was conducted in three mixed-gender secondary schools in the North East of England during the years of 2016 and 2017. Fifteen PE teachers participated in semi-structured interviews and 63 pupils took part in focus group discussions. The pupils included 30 boys and 33 girls who were mostly taught in different sets in PE. In two schools, boys and girls were taught in sets in PE. In the third school, boys were taught in sets and girls in mixed-ability groups in PE. This school was included in the study to shed further light on the gendered dimensions of setting and the differential impact of setting and mixed-ability grouping on pupils and their subjectivities in PE. The findings highlight that the policy of setting was interpreted and enacted differently by PE teachers in the case study schools. These differences reflected the complex and interconnecting impact of multiple internal and external factors, including the imperatives of performativity, the realities of the school context, and the broader educational philosophies of PE teachers. The enactment of setting policy in PE impacted on pupils and their subjectivities in multiple and diverse ways within and between the three case study schools. The nature of these impacts varied according to multiple factors, including set placement, gender, and school type. The study provides important insight into issues of equity and opportunity in PE and presents a case for further research exploring the often hidden consequences of setting and grouping practices for pupils' learning and participation in PE.

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that the thesis has fully acknowledged the opinions, ideas and contributions of others.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASCL: Association of School and College Leaders

ATL: Association of Teachers and Lecturers

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation

BTEC: Business and Technology Education Council

CPD: Continuous Professional Development

CRE: Commission for Racial Equality

DES: Department of Education and Science

DFE: Department for Education

DfEE: Department for Education and Employment

DfES: Department for Education and Skills

ERA: Education Reform Act

ESL: English as a Second Language

FSMs: Free School Meals

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education

HMCI: Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education

LEA: Local Education Authority

Lib Dem: Liberal Democrats

Lib/Con: Liberal Democrats/Conservative

MoE: Ministry of Education

MP: Members of Parliament

NCPE: National Curriculum in Physical Education

NQT: Newly Qualified Teacher

NZ: New Zealand

OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

OFSTED: Office for Standards in Education

PE: Physical Education

PGCE: Postgraduate Certificate

PhD: Doctor of Philosophy

PM: Prime Minister

PPA: Planning and Preparation Time

SEN: Special Educational Needs

SES: Socio-Economic Status

SSP: Specialist Schools Programme

TES: Times Education Supplement

UK: United Kingdom

US: United States

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A personal biography

The seeds of this study were sown many years ago. One of my enduring memories of school is of being put into sets. Towards the end of Year 9 (age 13-14), I vividly remember being called into the school cafeteria to find out which set I would be placed in for General Certificate of Secondary Education [GCSE][1] mathematics and English lessons in Year 10 (age 14-15). This was not an individual activity. Instead, I found myself sitting in the school cafeteria with the whole year group. I recall feeling excited and optimistic, if not a little apprehensive. After all, I considered myself to be a good all-rounder at school. My parents had also invested heavily in my education. From an early age, I had private tutors in mathematics and French. I waited patiently as the mathematics teacher, and then the English teacher, read out a list of names for set 1. My name was not mentioned by either. My immediate thought was that they had made a mistake. Much to my dismay, however, my name was mentioned when the teachers read out a list of names for set 2. There were three sets in total. I felt a profound sense of humiliation, shame and embarrassment. These feelings were further compounded by my realisation that I would not be taking the higher-tier mathematics and English GCSE examination papers and therefore would also be unable to attain the higher-grade passes. I adopted a range of strategies to try and move to set 1, including attending after-school mathematics and English clubs and informing mathematics teachers about my private tutor. I clung to the hope that I would be moved to set 1, but this never materialised. This made me feel that there was no point in trying in mathematics and English lessons in school. There were several times that I wanted to give

[1] The GCSE is an academic qualification usually taken in several subjects by pupils aged 14-16 in secondary education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

up, but I knew I needed to obtain a GCSE grade C in mathematics and English to pursue a career in PE teaching.

My next four years were spent at Northumbria University, where I completed an undergraduate degree in Sport Development with Coaching and a Postgraduate Certificate [PGCE] in Secondary PE. A year later, I secured a job as a PE teacher at a secondary school (ages 11 to 16/18) in the North East of England. The PE department's policy was to set pupils[2] in each year of school. One of my first tasks as a PE teacher was to assign Year 7 (age 11-12) pupils to one of three PE sets. Things had come full circle and I was engaging in the same activity that had caused me so much distress as a pupil. The allocation of pupils to sets was decided jointly by PE teachers in the department. Pupils were observed over a period of four mixed-ability PE lessons and assessed against the National Curriculum level descriptors[3]. They were then gathered in the sports hall to be told which set they would be in for PE. My abiding memory is of pupils immediately labelling themselves as the best set, the average set, or the worst set in PE.

I found it extremely challenging teaching set 3 pupils. Most of these pupils felt that they were in the bottom set and so did not see the point in trying in PE. This made me feel uneasy, particularly as these experiences resonated with my own as a pupil in PE. However, as a newly qualified teacher [NQT] in my first year of teaching, I felt powerless to do anything about this situation. Despite having reservations about the use of setting in PE, I felt obliged to implement

[2] While I acknowledge that the term student is used in many international contexts, in England, school-aged children are commonly referred to as pupils. Accordingly, throughout this study I use the term pupil to refer to children in schools.

[3] These descriptors are intended to provide examples of how a given level of PE understanding might be recognised.

the practice. In those moments, I experienced conflict between my beliefs and my teaching practices. This conflict led me to question myself as a PE teacher. I witnessed first-hand the negative impacts of setting on some pupils in PE, and yet I continued to use the practice.

After only one year, I left secondary school PE teaching to take up a job as a lecturer at Northumbria University. The job was appealing because it provided me with the opportunity to study a Doctor of Philosophy [PhD] in a topic of my interest. My choice of topic was inspired by my personal experiences of setting, both as a pupil and as a PE teacher. A thorough literature search revealed that very little empirical work had addressed setting in PE. The research findings that I read were, almost without exception, from mathematics, English, and science lessons. This research demonstrated that setting may have negative impacts on pupils' motivation, self-esteem, learning, and achievement. I wondered whether these findings would apply equally to PE. This sparked my curiosity, and I began to investigate empirically the impacts of setting on teachers and pupils in PE. I present this empirical work in this study.

Introduction to setting

Setting is a practice of organising pupils by ability or attainment on a subject-by-subject basis within schools (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 2001). In England, setting is the most common approach to ability grouping, particularly in the core subjects of mathematics, English, and science (Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a, 2013b). Setting has, for the most part, been regarded by teachers as a way of reducing the range of ability within classes, thus making it easier to plan and deliver lessons (Boaler, 1997a; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004; Muijs & Dunne; 2010; Marks, 2012). It has also been hailed by successive

governments as a panacea for tackling underachievement in schools in England (Labour Party, 1997; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005; Conservative Party, 2010; The Office for Standards in Education[4] [Ofsted], 2013; Bald, 2018a, 2018b). For example, the White Paper[5], *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, states that setting can "raise academic standards because pupils are better engaged in their own learning" (DfES, 2005, p. 58).

There is a significant amount of evidence that setting has limited positive effects on pupils' achievement (Slavin, 1987, 1990; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Coe *et al*., 2014). In the few cases where setting has been shown to raise achievement, almost without exception, this has been limited to the achievement of high ability pupils (Boaler, 1997a; Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004). Setting has also been found to result in lower teacher expectations (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002), whole-class teaching methods (Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004; Marks 2012), increased anxiety for some pupils (Boaler *et al*., 2000; Hallam & Ireson, 2006), and inequities as lower ability classes are disproportionately represented by particular groups of pupils (Araújo, 2009; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a; Campbell, 2014; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Notwithstanding research showing the negative effects that setting can have on some pupils, the practice has, and continues to be, widespread in schools in England (Ofsted, 1998; Hallam *et al*., 2003; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a, 2013b; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

While there is an extensive research literature on setting, particularly in terms of attainment, the literature has, with few exceptions (Penney & Houlihan, 2003; Hallam *et al*., 2008;

[4] Ofsted is an independent body responsible for inspecting and regulating schools throughout England.
[5] In the British political system, a White Paper is a government report that declares new and intended policy direction.

Hamilton & O'Hara, 2011; Croston, 2014), been limited to mathematics, English, and science at the primary (ages 4 to 11) and secondary level[6]. There is a conspicuous absence of research that explores the practice of setting in other subject areas, such as PE. Previous research in the education literature has tended not to consider PE discretely. Instead, where PE has been included in research on setting, it has been grouped together with other subjects that are practically based, including art, music and drama (Ofsted, 1998; Hallam *et al*., 2008). With this conflation of practically based subjects, the education literature contains very little specific and detailed information on setting in PE. Setting has also been given only cursory attention in the PE literature. Where setting has featured, for the most part, it has appeared tangentially in studies of different topics, such as mixed-ability grouping and outsourcing (Evans, 1985, 2014; Evans *et al*., 1987; Penney & Houlihan, 2003; Chanal *et al*., 2005; Wilkinson & Penney, 2016), or been described in anecdotal accounts and theoretical discussions (Thomas, 1993; Evans, 2004; Fletcher, 2008; Stidder, 2012). At the time of writing this study, I could find no empirical research in the PE literature that focused specifically on setting. The only 'extended' study of setting I could find in the PE literature was by Croston (2014). Setting was not the focus of Croston's (2014) attention but emerged as an important issue in examining ability-based practices in PE.

The limited empirical research on setting in PE has confirmed that 'some' PE departments have turned to the practice to help meet pupils' perceived learning needs (Penney & Houlihan, 2003; Hallam *et al*., 2008; Croston, 2014). Croston's (2014) case study of a school in England

[6] In England, children begin their compulsory education in a primary school (ages 4 to 11). Children then transfer to a secondary school (ages 11 to 18) for the remainder of their compulsory education. Less commonly, in England, the education system in some LEAs is divided into three levels of schooling. In the three-tier model of provision, children move from a primary school (ages 4 to 9) to a middle school (ages 9 to 13/14) and then attend a high school (ages 13/14 to 18).

highlights several important issues relating to the nature and use of setting in PE. These issues include the use of narrow and limited criteria in setting decisions, limited movement between sets, and a marginalising effect on low ability pupils in PE. I discuss these findings in more detail in Chapter Three. Croston's (2014) research has gone some way towards addressing the dearth of empirical data on setting in PE. Nonetheless, little remains known about several important issues relating to setting in PE. For example, little is known about why and how setting occurs in PE, the decisions taken around setting policies, and the impact of setting on pupils in PE. This is an important gap in the literature because there is evidence to suggest that setting can have damaging consequences for pupils' social, emotional, and academic outcomes in mathematics, English, and science lessons (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Ireson & Hallam, 2005; Marks, 2014). These are potential negative effects for pupils who are currently taught PE in sets. The differential nature of subject cultures makes the extrapolation of research findings from classroom-based subjects to PE potentially problematic. In this regard, there is an urgent need for further research to better understand the implications of setting in PE. The paucity of research in this area means that educators can only speculate on the impacts of setting in PE. Further research also offers the potential for more 'effective' setting practices in PE. As Hornby and Witte (2014) explain, a better pedagogical understanding of setting is crucial to encourage schools and teachers to "base the grouping of pupils on research evidence regarding effective practices rather than on their current practices" (p. 94). This study, like Croston's (2014), marks an initial step in that process.

The broader neoliberal policy climate

This section reflects that it is important to consider the broader context in which the research is located, and amidst which the data needs to be understood. In England, as elsewhere (see

Macdonald, 2011, 2014; Pope, 2014; Penney *et al*., 2015; McLachlan, 2017; Sperka & Enright, 2019), education policy has increasingly been influenced by neoliberal principles and ideals (Evans, 2014a, 2014b; Evans & Davies, 2015; Paveling *et al*., 2019). Neoliberalism can be understood as complex and contradictory sets of practices and discourses organised around market-based social relations, accountability measures, outsourcing and privatisation of public services, competition between public services, and consumer choice (Macdonald, 2014; Azzarito, 2016; Barker, 2017; McCuaig *et al*., 2016). Neoliberalism rests on a fundamental belief in the capacity of market forces and private sector practices to improve standards (Ball, 2003, 2007; Williams, 2017). As previous research in physical and health education, and education more broadly, has identified, the ascendance of neoliberal practices and discourses has led schools to adopt economic models of provision that centre on achieving increased efficiency and effectiveness (Macdonald, 2011; Evans & Davies, 2014b; Williams, 2017; Azzarito *et al*., 2017). For example, individual schools are increasingly under pressure to improve teaching techniques and curriculum designs to induce more cost-efficient pedagogies and provide better performance outcomes (Evans & Davies, 2014b; Gard, 2015; Azzarito, 2016). They are also increasingly required to compete with one another for access to finite resources, including budgets (Ball, 2007; Pope, 2014; Williams, 2017).

The notion of performativity in particular can help to reveal how the principles and ideals of the neoliberal market economy are mobilised in schools (Ball, 2007; Azzarito, 2016; Williams, 2017). Ball (2007, p. 27) explains that "performativity is about driving out poor performance, inefficiencies and redundancies. It is achieved through the construction and publication of information and the drive to name, differentiate, and classify". This includes league tables, peer and annual reviews, performance targets, audits, and appraisals (Ball, 2008; Evans, 2014b; Williams, 2017). In this regard, "performativity works to render teaching and learning into

calculabilities" (Ball, 2012, p. 20). In the current neoliberal context of schooling, teachers are held responsible and accountable for measurable performance outcomes and, as such, are required to strive for excellence (Ball, 2008; Azzarito, 2016; Williams, 2017). The culture of performativity also generates market information for parents to guide their educational choices and enables the state to more closely monitor and evaluate the performance of individual schools (Ball, 2012; Evans & Davies, 2015; Williams, 2017).

A number of international studies point to the field of PE increasingly accepting and legitimising neoliberal practices and discourses. For example, researchers have highlighted that PE departments are drawing on the services of commercial providers, including specialist sports coaches, to help deliver curricular and extra-curricular PE (Williams *et al*., 2011; Whipp *et al*., 2011; Williams & Macdonald, 2015; Wilkinson & Penney, 2016; Jones & Green, 2017) and are buying into commercially backed initiatives in an attempt to improve pupils' health and physical activity levels (Macdonald, 2011; Powell, 2015, 2018; Azzarito, 2016; Robinson *et al*., 2016). A number of concerns have been raised about the impact of neoliberalism in PE, with the recognition that market and neoliberal discourses do not merely shape the contexts in which teachers are working, but also find expression in teaching practices and learning experiences. Particularly pertinent to this study are observations that the privileging of these discourses can deepen social inequalities by excluding some pupils from access to high-status resources and learning opportunities (Macdonald *et al*., 2008; Williams *et al*., 2011; Evans & Davies, 2014b, 2015; Azzarito *et al*., 2017; Thorburn *et al*., 2019).

Research objectives and questions

While the influence of neoliberalism on the structure and delivery of PE has been discussed and researched in some depth (see Macdonald, 2011; Williams *et al*., 2011; Whipp *et al*., 2011; Pope, 2014; Petrie *et al*., 2014; Williams & Macdonald, 2015; Powell, 2015, 2018; Jones & Green, 2017), there is a lack of research specifically examining the impact of neoliberalism on grouping strategies in PE. As I discuss further in Chapter Two, grouping strategies, and setting in particular, are integral to schools' and teachers' strategies to respond to performativity pressures. This research specifically examined how the policy of setting is understood and enacted by PE teachers, and the impact of this enactment on pupils in PE. To achieve these aims, a qualitative approach was used to answer the following questions:

- How do PE teachers interpret the policy of setting in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 PE? [7]
- How do PE teachers enact the policy of setting in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 PE?
- How does the enactment of the policy of setting impact on pupils and their subjectivities in Year 9 PE?

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is organised in eight chapters. Chapter One introduces the study, defining its background, origin, significance, research questions, and scope. Chapter Two focuses on the historical and contemporary contexts of setting in England. Here, I explore various institutional and socio-political factors that have influenced the types of 'ability grouping' used in schools in England, including setting and mixed-ability grouping. In doing so, the chapter provides the broader context for the study. In Chapter Three, I critically examine previous research related to setting. Empirical studies are critically reviewed with a view to better understanding the

[7] In Chapter Four, I explain why Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 and Year 9 pupils were the focus of the study.

nature of research on setting and justifying this study. Chapter Four, the methodology chapter, describes my paradigmatic position and the theoretical framework that guides the study. It also explains the methods that I employed to answer the research questions. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven present the findings of the qualitative analysis. Each chapter addresses one of the three research questions. In Chapter Eight, I draw together the thesis conclusions and present recommendations for future research and practice.

A note on terminology: Distinguishing setting and ability grouping strategies

The focus of this study is setting in secondary school PE. There is a tendency, however, for researchers, education policymakers, and teachers to interchange the terms setting and ability grouping. In this regard, as Dracup (2014, para. 1) asserts, "it has not always been possible to isolate the approach to setting since there is often a tendency to brigade it with streaming and/or a wider range of grouping strategies, occasionally including various approaches to within class grouping". Indeed, in sharing their accounts of how they enacted the policy of setting in PE, numerous PE teachers spoke of grouping pupils within sets. As a result, the study also includes some discussion of the interconnection between setting and within-class ability grouping in PE. Most PE teachers also used the terms setting and ability grouping interchangeably. One of the challenges of this study, therefore, was disentangling setting from the wider notion of ability grouping. In this regard, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter Two, I could not simply talk of setting because setting is inextricably intertwined with ability grouping.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF SETTING IN ENGLAND

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with a historical and political account of setting in England. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section provides a brief historical overview of the origins and evolution of streaming and mixed-ability grouping in schools in England. Here, I focus on selected developments that illustrate trends, contestations, and changing understandings in relation to ability and ability grouping. These trends include a growing emphasis on equal opportunities in schools, changing understandings of the nature of ability, and the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989. The second section explores how setting has been widely endorsed and reaffirmed in government policy since 1997. I select this year because, after a hiatus, ability grouping returned to the fore of educational policy developments in England (Labour Party, 1997; Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997). To this end, this chapter provides a historical, political, and cultural context for understanding why, over time, setting has been pursued by successive United Kingdom [UK] governments.

Ability grouping has long featured in schools in England. Macqueen (2013b) explains that the practice of grouping pupils by ability "has been common (though specific forms of the practice have varied) since the 1920s" (p. 1). Ability grouping has been employed in different forms, including streaming, mixed-ability grouping, within-class ability grouping, and setting. Their popularity has waxed and waned over the years, largely in response to changing educational

ideologies and political priorities (Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Marks, 2012). It is important to reiterate here that the focus of this study is on setting. The chapter demonstrates, however, that setting has evolved from ideas about streaming and mixed-ability grouping. From this viewpoint, I discuss setting in its historical context. Specifically, I discuss how ideologies, including historical and contemporary views on streaming, mixed-ability grouping, and the nature of ability, have and continue to inform approaches to setting in schools. As highlighted in Chapter One, there is also a tendency for education policy makers and researchers to use the terms setting and ability grouping interchangeably. Hence, before providing a detailed socio-political history of setting in England, I clarify and distinguish different forms of ability grouping.

Distinguishing different types of ability grouping practices

Ability grouping is a broad term that is frequently used in contexts of education, professional practice, and research internationally. From a conceptual point of view, ability grouping encompasses a wide range of practices, including setting, streaming, banding, and mixed-ability grouping. These practices are discussed briefly here. The nuances and distinctions between different ability grouping practices are discussed more extensively in Appendix 1. The use of the plural in referring to practices underscores the need to distinguish and define the different methods of ability grouping, and to clarify the use of terms relating to ability grouping in this study. This is necessary as definitions and nomenclature vary across time, researchers, policy, and education contexts (United States [US] Department of Education, 1998; Conservative Party, 2010; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2011; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2014). In this sense, ability grouping is not a transhistorical or transcultural phenomenon. As I explained in Chapter One, setting is the most prevalent form of ability grouping in schools in England (Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Hallam &

Parsons, 2013a, 2013b). This grouping arrangement is referred to as streaming in New Zealand [NZ], European and Asian school systems, and is termed regrouping in the US and in parts of Australia. These variations also span different levels of ability grouping. Ability grouping can be categorised in two distinct ways depending on its level and scale. First, between-class ability grouping, and second, within-class ability grouping.

Between-class ability grouping refers to systems of grouping that take place across subjects and classes (Macqueen, 2008; Kim, 2012; Matthews *et al*., 2013). Between-class ability grouping may be homogenous, as in the cases of setting, streaming, and banding, or heterogeneous, as in the case of mixed-ability grouping (Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). By contrast, within-class ability grouping involves teachers dividing pupils into small groups reflecting different levels of ability within the same class (Macqueen, 2008; Matthews *et al*., 2013; Hornby & Witte, 2014). Within-class ability grouping can occur amid both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. Hence, these practices are not mutually exclusive and, at any one-time, different forms of ability grouping may be operating at different levels within the same school (Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a).

The context in which this research was conducted was the English education system, where between-class ability grouping is referred to as setting, streaming, or mixed-ability grouping, and where intra-class ability grouping is recognised as within-class ability grouping. For simplicity, I occasionally refer to ability grouping in a broader sense. Specifically, however, the term is used to cover the practices of setting, streaming, mixed-ability grouping, and/or within-class ability grouping.

Assumptions underlying ability grouping practices

Ability grouping rests on a series of assumptions about the nature and distribution of ability, namely that pupils have different levels of ability, which are measurable, generalisable, and relatively unchanging (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Hallam *et al*., 2008). Evans (2004, p. 99) observes that "thinking of this kind runs through a multiple of grouping practices". It is important to note, however, that different conceptions of ability underlie different grouping practices. Streaming, for example, is based fundamentally on the notion of general ability. It assumes that individual pupils have the same level of ability in all school subjects and should be taught accordingly. As Sukhnandan and Lee (1998, p. 23) explain, where classes are streamed, "pupils are grouped based on general ability, regardless of variation in their levels of ability across subjects". Streaming is also based on the notion that ability is a fixed capacity. In this regard, movement between streams is restricted (Hallam & Parsons, 2013a, 2013b). This conception of ability has been challenged by psychological research and theory. Several theories (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1984) have suggested that intelligence is a complex, rather than a unitary construct. For example, Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences posits that individual pupils have a variety of intelligences that they bring to any learning situation.

In contrast to streaming, setting is founded on a more optimistic conception of ability. Ability is conceptualised as multifaceted and susceptible to change (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Macqueen, 2013b). It follows, then, that individual pupils differ in their abilities across time and school subjects. In this regard, as noted earlier in this chapter, setting is operated on a subject-by-subject basis and enables pupils to move between sets (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 2001).

Bailey and Bridges (1983, p. 67) explain that "decisions about how to group children in schools rest upon fundamental judgements about the moral, social, and political principles and values which are to be served by that grouping structure". Those arguing for ability grouping tend to refer, with different emphasis, to educational achievement and attainment (Ofsted, 1997, 2013; DfES, 2005; Conservative Party, 2007, 2010; Bald, 2018a, 2018b). In contrast, arguments for mixed-ability grouping tend to refer to the principles of equity and equality of opportunity (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1978; Goldstein & Audsley, 2009; Taylor *et al*., 2017). Arguments about ability grouping and mixed-ability grouping are, therefore, as Bailey and Bridges (1983, p. 67) note, "unavoidably rooted in judgements about the application of, and the weight to be given to, these values". As this chapter demonstrates, the emphasis given to these values has varied in education policy over time.

Historical context of ability grouping in England

The rise and decline of streaming

In the 1930s and well into the 1960s, the standard form of ability grouping in schools was streaming (Hallam *et al*., 2004b). The emergence of streaming can be traced to two developments: first, the Primary School Report of 1931; and, second, the increased use of intelligence testing in the English education system. The Primary School Report recommended that, where feasible, schools should group classes by ability (Hadow, 1931). At the same time, as Kelly (1978) explains, the work of psychologists and psychometricians, including Cyril Burt, Alfred Binet, and Lewis Terman, popularised the view that "ability could be measured and used as a basis for grouping" (p. 8). Following these developments, streaming became increasingly common in secondary schools and larger primary schools throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Jackson's (1964) survey of primary schools found that almost all (96%)

were streaming pupils, and that the majority (85%) of teachers were in favour of the grouping arrangement. As I explain below, concerns about streaming grew in the 1960s and its popularity and usage declined thereafter. In the 1970s, surveys revealed that only 20% of primary schools retained streaming (Bealing, 1972; DES, 1978). By the 1990s, this figure had declined to less than 3% (Lee & Croll, 1995).

In the 1960s and early 1970s, several studies pointed to the detrimental consequences of streaming on pupils' social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Willig, 1963; Jackson, 1964; Hargreaves 1967; DES, 1967; Lacey 1970; Barker Lunn, 1970). Jackson's (1964) seminal work, based on streamed and non-streamed primary schools in England, drew attention to the inequities of streaming, particularly for working-class pupils. These pupils were disproportionately members of low streams and were taught by less qualified and experienced teachers who had limited expectations for them. As we will see in Chapter Three, similar criticisms have also been levelled against setting in schools. Jackson (1964) concluded that, contrary to popular opinion, pupils in non-streamed primary schools made more progress, had a narrower spread of attainment, and had healthier social attitudes than those in streamed primary schools. Jackson's (1964) findings, and those of others (Hargreaves 1967; Lacey 1970; Barker Lunn, 1970), contributed significantly to raising awareness of the inadequacies of streaming and gradually began to change public and political attitudes towards its utility. Such concerns were bolstered by research indicating that intelligence could be modified and that the environment played some part in the process of cognitive growth (Piaget, 1936; Blewett, 1954; Sigel, 1963; Cattell, 1963). This was a significant finding, for if intelligence could be modified and acquired, then rigid and inflexible systems of ability grouping were flawed. Against this backdrop, teachers and educationalists campaigned for an end to streaming in schools (Gillard, 2008, 2009).

The rise and decline of mixed-ability grouping

In the 1970s and early 1980s, there was growing support for mixed-ability grouping in schools in England. This support was, for the most part, the result of two related factors: first, evidence indicating that mixed-ability grouping could lead to a fairer distribution of learning opportunities and educational goods in schools; and, second, the increasing salience of educational equality in educational policy in England. Hallam *et al*. (2003) explain that there was a general trend towards "a more child-centred approach with emphasis on the overall development of the individual, rather than on academic achievement, and on equality of opportunity, rather than the pursuit of excellence" (p. 70). The results of research indicated that teachers looked to mixed-ability grouping as a means of bringing about equal opportunities in schools (Ball, 1981; Evans, 1985). In principle at least, as Sukhnandan & Lee, (1998) point out, mixed-ability grouping provides all pupils with "equal access to a common curriculum, teachers, and resources" (p. 4). It also ameliorates some of the negative social impacts of separatism, since pupils of different abilities, social class backgrounds, and so on, are taught in the same class (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Fitz *et al*., 2005).

Mixed-ability grouping received influential support during this period. The Plowden Report (DES, 1967) added to the case for mixed-ability grouping, suggesting that it could promote the success of all pupils by providing them with equal access to the school curriculum, and by encouraging teachers to match their teaching to the needs of individual pupils (Hallam *et al*., 2004b; Gillard, 2008, 2009). The Report went on to recommend the abolition of streaming in all primary schools in England (DES, 1967; Bourne & Moon, 1994). In the ensuing decade, streaming was increasingly replaced by mixed-ability grouping in primary schools in England

(Gillard, 2008, 2009). More particularly, as Hallam *et al*. (2004b) point out, most primary schools "structured their classes based on mixed-ability with some within-class ability grouping" (p. 515). As the 1980s progressed, mixed-ability grouping came under critical scrutiny as political priorities once again shifted, this time from child-centred approaches to raising educational standards. Two major developments led schools to move away from mixed-ability grouping in favour of setting: first, the rise of a competitive market in education; and, second, the introduction of the National Curriculum (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). I discuss these developments next.

A return to ability grouping

The impact of marketisation on ability grouping

In the mid-1980s and beyond, educational reforms were increasingly driven by agendas seeking to raise standards of academic achievement (Simon, 1988; Ball, 1990; Bowe *et al*., 1992). In view of these agendas, the government encouraged competition between schools. As Saltmarsh and Youdell explained in 2004, "the last 15 years of neo-liberal policy reform have seen the application of competitive principles drawn from the private sector to public services, including state education" (p. 354). In this neoliberal context, the performances of individuals or institutions serve as measures of productivity, output, or quality (Ball, 1990, 2003; Gewirtz *et al*., 1993, 1995). More specifically, in the English education system, aggregate GCSE examination results and Ofsted inspection reports serve as indicators of school status and performance (Ball, 1990; Ball *et al*., 1994, 1996). Schools' aggregate performance scores were published annually by national newspapers in the form of league tables (Maclure, 1989; Ball, 1990; Penney & Evans, 1999). These league tables ranked schools hierarchically in order of their GCSE examination outcomes.

The league table culture was generative of a reductionist model of school success and failure (Gewirtz *et al*., 1993; Reay, 1998b; Ball, 2003). The relative success or 'quality' of schools was gauged, for the most part, by their propensity to deliver A* to C grades in GCSE examinations. In the quasi-education market, pupils are therefore valued for their capacity to generate market currency (A* to C grades). In practice, the heightened emphasis on performing well in league tables led schools to disproportionately focus attention and resources on potential high attainers (Boaler, 1997a; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001). Public policy discourses of the 'successful school' also encouraged the assumption that a schools performance data represented the quality of education they provided (Ball, 2003, 2016). At a more systemic level, this performance data fails to account for contextual factors (e.g. pedagogy, curriculum, and levels of resourcing) and the contribution made by the school to the progress of each individual pupil.

The education market resulted in many primary and secondary schools in England returning to policies of ability grouping (Boaler, 1997a; Reay, 1998b; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). The funding mechanisms created an imperative for schools to attract middle-class parents and pupils. This was because middle-class pupils were seen by schools to be more likely to attain higher GCSE grades and therefore improve the schools' position in the education marketplace (Gewirtz *et al*. 1993; Ball, 2003). In this regard, schools were particularly concerned to increase their appeal to middle-class parents. Setting was used to this end. Indeed, research has demonstrated that middle-class parents are in favour of setting because they assume that their child will be in the higher set (Ball *et al*., 1994; Gewirtz *et al*., 1993, 1995; Reay, 1998b; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Wiliam & Bartholomew 2004; Araújo, 2007; Francis *et al*., 2017).

The National Curriculum and ability grouping

In England and Wales, the National Curriculum, enshrined in the 1988 Education Reform Act [ERA], had a profound impact on the grouping practices employed in schools. Broadly, the National Curriculum was introduced to raise standards of attainment in schools (DES, 1989; Penney & Evans, 1999). To do so, the ERA set forth the programmes of study that all local authority-maintained schools had to follow. The National Curriculum has undergone several revisions since 1988, however, subsequent iterations have continued to emphasise educational standards. The National Curriculum, like the education market, rekindled interest in ability grouping in schools (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Dracup, 2014). For example, the results of research demonstrated that many teachers perceived the National Curriculum to be incompatible with mixed-ability grouping (Gewirtz *et al*., 1993; Ball *et al*., 1994; Boaler, 1997a, 1997b). Several teachers in research by Gewirtz *et al*. (1993) and Reay (1998b) also reported that the imposition of the National Curriculum had led them to return to ability grouping. In this regard, ability grouping was perceived by teachers to be a pragmatic decision based upon the difficulties of teaching the National Curriculum to mixed-ability classes.

The Labour Party and setting

The Labour Party signalled their commitment to ability grouping in their manifesto[8] for the 1997 general election (Labour Party, 1997). The manifesto stated that "children are not all of the same ability, nor do they learn at the same speed. That means setting children in classes to maximise progress, for the benefit of high-fliers and slower learners alike" (Labour Party,

[8] A manifesto is a published document wherein political parties outline their policy intentions ahead of a general election.

1997, p. 7). The Party's position on setting in schools was reaffirmed in their first education White Paper, *Excellence in Schools*, published in July 1997 (DfEE, 1997). *Excellence in Schools* set out the Labour government's plans for raising standards in education. The focus on standards was promoted in conjunction with concerns for social justice and inclusion: with the principle to "benefit the many, not the few" (DfEE, 1997, p. 11). The DfEE (1997, p. 38) stated that: "We do not believe that any single model of grouping pupils should be imposed on schools, but unless a school can demonstrate that it is getting better than expected results through a different approach, we do make the presumption that setting should be the norm in secondary schools". The DfEE argued for the use of setting in science, mathematics, and languages lessons. The White Paper went on to recommend that primary schools should also consider setting pupils in some unspecified cases, and that all primary and secondary schools should notify parents about their grouping policies (DfEE, 1997).

The White Paper, *Excellence in Schools*, was also trenchant in its critique of mixed-ability grouping. It argued that an adherence to mixed-ability grouping had proved incapable of addressing underachievement and raising standards of achievement (DfEE, 1997). The White Paper also asserted that mixed-ability grouping had "proved successful only in the hands of the best teachers" (DfEE, 1997, p. 37). In too many instances it had therefore "failed both to stretch the brightest and to respond to the needs of those who had fallen behind" (DfEE, 1997, p. 38). In this respect, the Labour government was not "prepared to stand still and defend the failings of across-the-board mixed-ability teaching" (DfEE, 1997, p. 38-39).

The exhortation to use setting was reiterated in two further Labour government policy documents. The Green Paper[9], *Schools: Building on Success*, recommended "further increases in the extent of setting by subject ability" including express sets to enable more able pupils to "advance beyond the levels set for their age and to take Key Stage 3 tests early" (DfEE, 2001, p. 51). *Schools: Building on Success* outlined the government's plans for raising standards and increasing inclusion in education. Although setting was a key component of the Labour government's early education policy agenda (Labour Party, 1997; DfEE, 1997), their encouragement for setting seemed to diminish somewhat in later publications (DfES, 2001, 2004). The White Papers, *Schools Achieving Success* (DfES, 2001) and *Five-Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (DfES, 2004) made no reference to setting. The trend towards setting was re-established with the publication of the White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (DfES, 2005).

Higher Standards, Better Schools for All set out, inter alia, the Labour government's plans to ensure that each individual pupil achieved their potential in school (DfES, 2005). It claimed that grouping pupils by ability and achievement could "help build motivation, social skills, and independence; and most importantly can raise academic standards because pupils are better engaged in their own learning" (DfES, 2005, p. 58). Notably, the evidence to support the efficacy of setting for any of these claims is limited. Notwithstanding this, large numbers of schools followed recommendations from the DfES and introduced (or reintroduced) policies of setting, at least in some parts of the curriculum. Survey data in the late 1990s and the early 2000s indicated a growth in the proportion of primary and secondary schools using setting

[9] In the UK, a Green Paper is a preliminary report of government proposals in terms of policy and legislation that is published to provoke discussion. A Green Paper is a precursor to a White Paper.

since 1997 (Ofsted, 1998; Hallam *et al*., 2003). This was particularly so in Key Stage 3 mathematics and English classes.

The Coalition government and setting

In May 2010, the Labour government was voted out of office and replaced by a Conservative led Coalition[10] government with the Liberal Democrats [Herein Lib/Con]. The change from a Labour government to a Lib/Con government added considerable impetus to the policy of setting in schools. Conservative leader, David Cameron, had long been a proponent of setting. As far back as 2006, he stated clearly that he supported the practice. Cameron also indicated that he envisaged an increase in setting in schools if the Conservatives came to power. This is evident in the following comment: "I want to see setting in every single school. Tony Blair promised it in 1997. But it still hasn't happened. We will keep up the pressure till it does" (Wintour, 2014a, para. 1). This pressure intensified in subsequent years as setting continued to be endorsed and reaffirmed in Lib/Con Coalition and Conservative policy developments.

Setting was also a conspicuous feature of the Lib/Con Coalition government's espoused commitment to raising standards in education. In his Keynote Speech to Party members in 2007 and in his Party's general election manifesto in 2010, Conservative Party leader, David Cameron, echoed Labour's calls (DfEE, 1997; DfES, 2005) for more setting in schools (Conservative Party, 2007, 2010). *The Telegraph* reported Cameron saying: "I want the Conservative Party to help me campaign in setting by each subject in every school so that we actually do what I think is common sense which is to help stretch the brightest pupils and help

[10] A Coalition government is one where two or more political parties combine to create a majority government.

those who are in danger of falling behind" (Lightfoot, 2006, para. 1). Cameron stated unequivocally that "setting by ability was the only solution to achieving this ambition" (Conservative Party, 2007, p. 33). He also warned that schools could face closure if they failed to set by ability for every subject (Paton, 2007). Speaking to parents, teachers, and governors at a comprehensive school in London, the then Shadow Education Secretary, David Willets, intimated that he would look at how best to spread setting in schools and "would not rule out ministers getting involved in the way schools organise setting" (Lightfoot, 2006, para. 1). He added: "We are not saying that an edict will go out from the DfE that schools are instructed to set in all circumstances, but the empirical evidence is that it works" (Lightfoot, 2006, para. 1). Michael Gove, the Education Secretary at the time, affirmed his support for setting in schools. In the Conservative Green Paper, *Raising the Bar, Closing the Gap*, Gove emphasised the need to "alter guidance to Ofsted to ensure that schools - particularly those not performing at high levels - set all academic subjects by ability" (Conservative Party, 2007, p. 33). The change in government from Labour to the Lib/Con Coalition government arguably resulted in a more aggressive approach to government intervention in ability grouping decisions in schools (Coughlan, 2014; Paton, 2014). I develop this point in the next section.

The Conservative Party and setting

In early September 2014, several national newspaper reports (Wintour, 2014a; Press Association, 2014; Paton, 2014; Clark, 2014) surfaced and claimed that the Conservative government was contemplating plans to oblige secondary schools to teach pupils in sets. The idea had been foreshadowed a year earlier in an article appearing in *The Times Educational Supplement* [TES] (Stewart, 2013). At this stage, newspaper reports were unclear about whether setting would be imposed on all secondary school subjects or confined to the core

subject areas of mathematics, English, and science. On the 3rd of September, political journalist, Patrick Wintour, reported that the Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, would announce the policy in the run up to the 2015 general election (Wintour, 2014a). According to newspaper reports (Wintour, 2014a; Paton, 2014; Schools Week, 2014), Morgan was to ask Ofsted to enforce and monitor the proposal. Newspaper reports did not specify whether Ofsted would be willing to enforce Morgan's plans, but it is worth noting that Ofsted is not neutral about ability grouping in schools. For example, in September 2012, Ofsted's Chief Inspectorate, Sir Michael Wilshaw, gave his support to calls for greater use of setting in secondary schools. In Wilshaw's view, "all secondary schools should opt to organise pupils into ability sets in most subjects from the age of 11. I'd set from the word go" (Levy, 2013, para. 1). Reports suggested that Ofsted would be asked to make setting a condition of receiving the top inspection rating[11] (Wintour, 2014a; Paton, 2014; Schools Week, 2014). In this regard, setting would not be compulsory, but it would be incentivised through the Ofsted inspection process. The involvement of Ofsted would provide central government with a powerful lever to shape the pupil grouping policies adopted in schools. Although schools would still be 'free' to make their own decisions about pupil grouping, they would be increasingly constrained in the direction of setting.

The proposed reforms brought about a vociferous and widespread response from teachers, newspaper reporters, teaching unions, opposition parties, and the Liberal Democrat [Lib Dem] Coalition partners. The Lib Dems insisted that they would not support a Coalition policy of compulsory setting. A newspaper report by *The Telegraph* (Paton, 2014, para. 1) included comment from the Lib Dem Schools Minister, David Laws, who stated that compulsory setting

[11] There are four categories in Ofsted's school rating system. Schools can be rated as outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate (Ofsted, 2015).

had "not been agreed with the Liberal Democrats and was not government policy". He added: "We don't believe it would be appropriate to tie schools' hands in this way". The Labour Party took a similar stance. Tristram Hunt, the Shadow Education Secretary, called on Morgan to reject political involvement in school level decision-making. In a report covered by the *British Broadcasting Corporation* [BBC], Hunt said: "We thought there was political consensus on the importance of school autonomy. I believe that excellent heads and great teachers know better than Westminster politicians how to deliver the best schooling for all pupils" (Coughlan, 2014, para. 2). Head teachers also reported that they were against political intervention in professional decisions (Coughlan, 2014; Paton, 2014).

Patrick Wintour of *The Guardian* newspaper raised questions about how government plans for compulsory setting would be enforced legally (Wintour, 2014a). He argued that independent academies were "set up to be free of state control" (Wintour, 2014a, para. 1). The government would therefore not have jurisdiction over these schools and could not instruct them to set pupils. The idea also came in for criticism from both the Association of Teachers and Lecturers [ATL][12] and the Association of School and College Leaders [ASCL][13]. The General Secretary of the ATL, Dr. Mary Bousted, said: "If Nicky Morgan is committed to closing the attainment gap for disadvantaged children the last thing she should do is to divide children into ability sets and use Ofsted to enforce this" (Wintour, 2014b, para. 1). Similar concerns were voiced by Brian Lightman, Head of the ASCL. Responding to media speculation that Morgan intended to mandate setting in schools, Lightman asserted that the ASCL "cannot agree with this. The focus should be on student outcomes. The way students are helped to achieve their potential should be a professional decision for schools" (ASCL, 2014, para. 1). He also contended that

[12] The ATL is the trade union and professional association for practitioners involved in education in the UK.
[13] The ASCL is the professional association for leaders of secondary schools and colleges in the UK.

"If schools are already achieving high standards within a mixed-ability context, it is surely wrong to make them change" (Paton, 2014, para. 1).

The Conservative governments' doctrinaire approach to setting leaves little scope for debate and dissention over the best way to group pupils in individual schools and subjects (Marks, 2012; Dracup, 2014; Francis *et al*., 2017). If mixed-ability grouping is proving to be effective in raising standards of achievement and reducing educational inequalities in some schools, it would be educationally unjustifiable to proscribe the policy or encourage these schools to move away from this approach. Nonetheless, as successive UK governments have pressed schools to organise pupils in sets, there has been no exemption for those that perform at high levels using mixed-ability grouping (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Dracup, 2014; Archer *et al*., 2018). It is important to remember that every school has its own unique culture and circumstance. The most effective approach to grouping in one school is therefore not automatically the most effective in another (Kelly, 1978; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Dracup, 2014). Kelly (1978, p. 24) reminds us that "the purposes of a school are multifarious, and many different kinds of grouping are needed to meet them". As such, it is naïve to expect all schools to adhere to a policy of setting.

Morgan expressly repudiated suggestions that the Conservative government was contemplating plans to make setting a compulsory requirement in schools. She told Members of Parliament [MPs] in the House of Commons that "there is absolutely no truth in those rumours" (Wintour, 2014b; Coughlan, 2014; Groves, 2015). Notwithstanding this, sources suggested that the policy of compulsory setting had merely been deferred and would be revived as part of the 2015 general election manifesto (Wintour, 2014a; Press Association, 2014; Paton, 2014; Clark,

2014). This was not the case (Conservative Party, 2015). There has been no further announcement on the use of setting in schools. It appears that the Conservative Government has dropped, or at least set aside a pledge to enforce a policy of setting on secondary schools (Stewart, 2013; Garner, 2014; Cook, 2014). At the time of writing, the Department for Education [DfE] and Ofsted continue to recommend setting in schools. Morgan's abrupt abandonment of plans to force schools to adopt a policy of setting is perhaps an attempt to placate strong criticism from teachers and educationalists. It might also relate to the ambiguity about the benefits of setting and its impact on pupils. As I discuss in Chapter Three, research has cast doubt on the putative capacity of setting to enhance pupils' academic and affective outcomes in schools.

Ofsted and ability grouping

Like the Labour government in the late 1990s (DfEE, 1997), Ofsted (2013) have condemned mixed-ability grouping for failing to "nurture scholastic excellence" (p. 5). In a report of more than 2,300 lessons in 41 comprehensive schools, Ofsted inspectors warned that many of the most able pupils were being systematically failed by mixed-ability grouping, often receiving "mediocre and insufficiently challenging work" (Ofsted, 2013, p. 5). In the "less effective state schools", Ofsted found that teaching, tasks, and resources were "pitched at the middle" (Ofsted, 2013, p. 9). Consequently, Ofsted inspectors warned that in most mixed-ability lessons, teachers failed to sufficiently "challenge and extend the most able pupils" (Ofsted, 2013, p. 8). Ofsted's report bemoaned the fact that some teachers (in lessons observed by inspectors) did not make adequate provision for the brightest pupils (Ofsted, 2013). Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education [HMCI], Michael Wilshaw, said: "If you have got a youngster with low basic skills sitting alongside a youngster with Oxbridge potential, then it is really important

that is taken into account" (Hurst, 2012, para. 1). According to Ofsted figures, the most able pupils were well taught in only a fifth of mixed-ability lessons observed by inspectors (Ofsted, 2013; Paton, 2013). Ofsted (2013) suggested that this was due to teachers' lack of knowledge about effective differentiation in mixed-ability classes, and a lack of challenge for the most able pupils, particularly at Key Stage 3. The report concluded that "in around 40% of the comprehensive schools visited, the most able students were not making the progress of which they were capable" (Ofsted, 2013, p. 7).

On launching the report, Wilshaw said that many pupils "simply became used to performing at a lower level than they were capable of and this was too readily accepted by teachers" (Paton & Mason, 2013, para. 1). The comments were made just days after Prime Minister [PM], David Cameron, warned that reforms were needed because schools had become 'increasingly comfortable with failure' (Paton & Mason, 2013, para. 1). In a statement covered in *The Independent* newspaper, Wilshaw also argued that mixed-ability grouping does not work unless it is accompanied by "effective differentiated teaching" (Garner, 2012, para. 1). He added, however, that such teaching was "hugely difficult to achieve" (Garner, 2012, para. 1).

In another report, this time in *The Telegraph* newspaper, Wilshaw took a more sanguine view of mixed-ability grouping in schools. He suggested that "it was possible to cater for different abilities in the same lesson" (Paton, 2012, para. 1) by using small groups of pupils in the class and individual programmes of work. This view was short lived. In a powerful warning to schools in the same newspaper report, Wilshaw said that: "If they want mixed-ability, then they have got to make sure there's differentiated teaching. And we will be very critical when we inspect schools, particularly in the secondary sector, if we see mixed-ability classes without

mixed-ability teaching" (Paton, 2012, para. 1). Wilshaw called for secondary schools to separate pupils into sets unless they could categorically prove that bright pupils reached their potential in mixed-ability classes.

Ofsted's report (2013) on mixed-ability grouping is another critique of practice that privileges the needs of the most able. Wilshaw's certainty that mixed-ability grouping does not work belies the fact that Ofsted's research focussed on the outcomes of the most able pupils only. Ofsted did not consider the commensurate impact of mixed-ability grouping on the learning and progress of pupils across the ability range. The report also adopted a very simplistic vision of pupils in the middle (Ofsted, 2013, p. 9). Pupils in the middle, like those perceived by Ofsted to be more and less able, have diverse abilities, needs, and interests. Very few pupils stand to benefit from teaching that is pitched at the middle.

The case for mixed-ability grouping in schools

The report by Ofsted (2013) emerged at a time when there may have been a case for an increased focus on mixed-ability grouping in schools. A study of 500 Teach First[14] graduates working in schools in deprived areas reported a range of benefits in teaching pupils in mixed-ability groups (Goldstein & Audsley, 2009). According to Goldstein and Audsley (2009), mixed-ability grouping could not only address inequality of opportunity by providing all pupils, regardless of background and ability level, with equal access to teachers, curriculum, and resources, but it could also contribute to raising standards. Teach First staff articulated the importance of "redistributing skills and abilities, pairing stronger and weaker learners to

[14] Teach First is a registered charity, which works in partnership with schools to address educational inequality in the classroom.

improve learning outcomes for all and developing partnerships where academic and social skills could be exchanged" (Goldstein & Audsley, 2009, p. 40). In this regard, mixed-ability grouping enabled stronger pupils to assume the role of quasi-teacher, where they could assist and encourage their weaker peers. Contrary to the generally held view, the benefits of mixed-ability grouping were reciprocal for both strong and weak pupils. Teach First staff noted that in mixed-ability lessons, weaker pupils could improve their performance by working alongside stronger peers who could explain questions, tasks, concepts, etc. to them. In doing so, stronger pupils gained confidence from supporting others in their learning (Goldstein & Audsley, 2009; Teach First, 2012). There is theoretical and empirical evidence to support Goldstein and Audsley's findings. Research has long demonstrated that mixed-ability grouping can promote pupils' social-emotional development and enhance achievement for more and less able pupils (DES, 1967; Newbold, 1977; Lyle, 1999; Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003).

Goldstein and Audsley (2009) added that setting and streaming were often implemented in lessons entirely for the benefit of teachers - some of who struggled with the pedagogical challenge of providing for a wide heterogeneity of needs, abilities, and attainments in large, mixed-ability classes (Goldstein & Audsley, 2009). The report concluded by recommending "an open debate on the benefits and drawbacks of setting and streaming versus mixed-ability classes from the perspectives of all stakeholders" (Goldstein & Audsley, 2009, p. 40). The report, which was sent to the leaders of the Conservatives, Labour, and the Lib Dems, challenged established thinking on the benefits and drawbacks of setting and mixed-ability grouping. Far from heeding the results of Teach First's research, however, the Conservative government remained obdurate in its convictions about mixed-ability grouping. The recommendations and conclusions of Teach First's report generated anger from some politicians, head teachers, and educationalists. A national newspaper included comment from

Rod MacKinnon, Head Teacher of Bristol Grammar School. MacKinnon told *The Telegraph* that Teach First's findings were "profoundly wrong. Setting works as long as pupils can move between sets and you are providing a different educational experience in the top and more academically challenged groups" (Paton, 2009, para. 1). MacKinnon continued by stressing that mixed-ability grouping is a "levelling-down of standards and leads to mediocrity of performance" (Paton, 2009, para. 1).

Conclusion

There has been a political consensus on the benefits of setting in primary and secondary schools in England. Regardless of differences in ideology and interest, successive governments, starting with Blair's first term as PM (1997-2001), have encouraged schools to resort or revert to setting to raise attainment, motivation, and learning (DfEE, 1997, DfES, 2005; Conservative Party, 2007, 2010). Notwithstanding the political rhetoric about the importance of setting pupils in schools, there is little empirical evidence to substantiate the efficacy of the policy. Setting has been shown to have a negative impact on pupils' attainment, motivation, and learning (Kulik & Kulik, 1982, 1992; Slavin, 1987, 1990, 1993; Cahan *et al*., 1996; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Ireson *et al*., 2005). In the face of disconfirming evidence, however, the Labour and Conservative governments have continued to promote setting in schools. To this end, it appears that their proposals for setting have been framed and driven by ideology and dogma, rather than by systematic research and practice. This is a notable point given that many primary and secondary schools have followed their recommendations and implemented setting (Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a, 2013b).

The repudiation of mixed-ability grouping has also been a permeating theme in contemporary educational policy (Labour Party, 1997; DfEE, 1997; Ofsted, 2013). Both Labour and Conservative governments have concluded that academic and teaching standards are liable to suffer in mixed-ability classes. This is despite some empirical evidence indicating that mixed-ability grouping can improve pupils' confidence and achievement (Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Goldstein & Audsley, 2009; Roberts, 2016; Taylor *et al*., 2017). Ofsted (2013) have also warned that mixed-ability grouping leads to a fall in standards, particularly for the more able pupils. In this regard, over the past two decades or so, schools have been actively encouraged to move away from mixed-ability grouping in favour of setting (DfEE, 1997, DfES, 2005; Conservative Party, 2007, 2010; Bald, 2018a, 2018b).

Political debates about ability grouping have long been characterised by dualism and contradiction. They have perpetually focussed on between-class ability grouping (setting, streaming, and mixed-ability grouping) and more and less able pupils. For the most part, educational policies and critiques of practice have been explicitly concerned with the more able pupils. There has been less emphasis on what is best educationally for less able pupils and those at the middle. Moreover, mixed-ability grouping has long been associated with academic failure and setting with academic excellence. These assumptions need to be problematised because they ignore the particularities of individual schools and subjects. Dracup (2014, para. 13) asserts that a more careful and nuanced argument would "highlight the different contexts where setting" and mixed-ability grouping "might be more and less likely to operate effectively". Fitz *et al*. (2005), for example, suggest that the practice of setting aligns more with subjects or classrooms where learning is conceptualised as linear, and where mastery of one stage is thought to be necessary before proceeding to the next, than with contexts where pedagogy is not constructed in this way. Fitz *et al*. (2005) did not identify specific contexts as

linear or nonlinear. Ball (1981) and Hallam and Ireson (2003), however, point to mathematics and science being particularly associated with linear conceptualisations of learning. It is important to recognise therefore that no one form of grouping will "ever be shown to be objectively better than any other, because no one form of grouping will be suitable for all purposes" (Kelly, 1978, p. 24). The next chapter should be read with these considerations in mind.

CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with a critical review of the extant literature on setting in schools in England. Occasionally, the review takes in practices such as streaming, regrouping, and mixed-ability grouping. This reflects the fact that some research has considered setting, streaming, and/or other variations of ability grouping collectively, and that some researchers have used the term ability grouping in its broadest sense. I start the chapter with a review of the literature on ability grouping to identify what is known, what remains to be known, and to assess its claimed benefits. The emergence and proliferation of ability grouping, and specifically setting, in primary and secondary schools in England has been justified with the argument that the practice advances pupils' motivation, social skills, independence, and academic success in national tests and examinations (DfEE, 2001; DfES, 2005; Conservative Party, 2007; Ofsted, 2013). This review of literature critically engages with these assumptions. Attention is drawn to several substantive issues including, but not limited to, fixed and permanent setting, the potential misplacement of pupils to particular sets, a culture of stereotyping, whereby learners within a set are taught as a single homogenous unit, and a widening gap between the attainment of pupils in high and low ability sets. The chapter also considers why, despite a lack of supporting evidence, setting continues to pervade primary and secondary schools in England and continues to be actively promoted by politicians, policymakers, and teachers. Here, I seek to challenge a number of conventions regarding the nature of ability that have largely remained unproblematised and suggest a need for research on setting to engage with the concept of ability in a more critical way (for exceptions, see Gillborn 2000; Hamilton, 2010; Marks, 2012, 2013; Francis *et al*., 2017). In the last section of

the chapter, I briefly review the theoretical approaches adopted in the ability grouping literature. Specifically, I draw on illustrative examples to highlight the contribution of psychological, critical policy, and sociological approaches to investigating ability grouping. The discussion serves as a starting point to identify my own theoretical contribution to research in this field and to discuss the theoretical framework used in this study.

The incidence of setting in schools

There is very little empirical evidence on the extent of setting in primary and secondary schools in England, and the scarce evidence that exists is mostly anecdotal and restricted to a few curriculum areas. Most of the evidence is derived from first-hand observations of lessons by Ofsted inspectors. In comments accompanying Ofsted's figures, however, HMCI, Sir Michael Wilshaw, noted that "its inspections have not involved observing all teachers in a school. Lessons that were seen were thus not necessarily representative of the school or system as a whole" (Dracup, 2014, para. 2). Wilshaw stressed, therefore, that "there was no way of using this data to draw out national conclusions in any way" (Dracup, 2014, para. 2). Occasionally, Ofsted have also referred to subjects in a general sense, without specifying which are using setting. Ofsted inspection data on setting should be read in light of these limitations.

Ofsted's (1997) Annual Report of 4,077 primary schools revealed that most were setting pupils in Year 5 (age 9-10) and Year 6 (age 10-11) for mathematics and, to a lesser extent, for English. A year later, Ofsted (1998) reported that setting was increasing, particularly in Year 5 and Year 6 mathematics and English lessons. Ofsted (1998) suggested that approximately 60% of primary schools set pupils for at least one subject in some year groups (Hallam *et al.*, 2004a).

In most cases, primary schools used setting in Year 5 and Year 6 only, "with the proportion of pupils setted falling steadily the younger they were" (Hallam & Parsons, 2013b, p. 515). Of those primary schools using setting, 96% did so for mathematics, 69% for English, and 9% for science. Ofsted (1998) noted that setting was used very little, or not at all, in other primary school subjects. Similar findings have been reported by Hallam *et al*. (2003) and Hamilton and O'Hara (2011). In a survey of the grouping practices of 804 primary schools in England, Hallam *et al*. (2003) showed that setting was most common in mathematics, followed by English and science, and occurred with increasing frequency as pupils moved through the primary school. Hallam *et al*. (2003) suggested, however, that within-class ability grouping in mixed-ability classes was the most common approach in mathematics and English and that in all other subjects, mixed-ability grouping was the norm. Hamilton and O'Hara's (2011) survey of 338 primary schools in Scotland also showed higher levels of setting for mathematics than other subjects in primary schools. Hamilton and O'Hara (2011) revealed that 54% of primary schools surveyed were using setting or broad banding and 18% of the remainder had used setting or broad banding in the past.

In secondary schools, Ofsted (2002) estimated that 47% of lessons were set or streamed. Two years later, Ofsted (2004) reported that 44% of lessons observed by inspectors were set and 4% were streamed or banded. This figure rose steadily to 46% in 2009 and remained relatively stable in 2011 and 2013 (Ofsted, 2009, 2011, 2013). In 2011, Ofsted reported that, excluding PE, around 45% of secondary school lessons used some form of setting (Paton, 2012). Two years later, the proportion also stood at 45% (Ofsted, 2013). Ofsted also suggested that ability grouping practices changed as pupils become older. Ofsted (2011, 2013) indicated that most secondary schools would often initially use mixed-ability grouping in the first year (Year 7), but that setting typically began to operate from the second year (Year 8) onwards, particularly

in mathematics, English, and science. Where classes in Year 7 were taught in sets, Ofsted (2011, 2013) noted that this was often only for mathematics. In this regard, Ofsted (2011, 2013) suggested that pupils would increasingly experience setting as they progressed through the secondary school. Similar findings have been observed by Ireson *et al*. (2002b). Ireson *et al*.'s (2002b) survey of grouping practices in Key Stage 3 mathematics, English, and science classes revealed that setting increased in Year 8 and Year 9. Following the trend reported in primary schools, Ireson *et al*. (2002b) also found that setting was most prevalent in mathematics. 65% of the 46 sample schools reported setting throughout Years 7, 8, and 9 in mathematics, 31% in science, and 27% in English.

Ofsted (2011, 2013) and Ireson *et al*. (2002) did not provide insight into why secondary schools typically delay setting until Year 8. Chitty (2001) and Fitz *et al*. (2005), however, provide some clarification on this approach. In England, secondary schools take pupils from a wide variety of primary feeder schools. Accordingly, as Chitty (2001) and Fitz *et al*. (2005) explain, many teachers feel that there is a need for a period of assessment before firm decisions can be made about the allocation of pupils to sets. In part, Fitz *et al*. (2005) suggest that this is because secondary school teachers are reluctant to rely on prior attainment data for decisions about setting. Pupils are therefore typically placed in mixed-ability groups in the first year of secondary school to provide teachers with a window into their abilities, attainments, learning needs, and so on (Chitty, 2001; Fitz *et al*., 2005). Based on their own observations and assessments, teachers then feel more confident about placing pupils in sets in Year 8 (Chitty, 2001; Fitz *et al*., 2005).

It is clear from the data reviewed that ability grouping is not a uniform practice. No single form of ability grouping has been found to be used in primary and secondary schools in England. Instead, schools tend to operate a range of different ability grouping practices, in some cases, in combination with each other. As Ireson *et al*. (2002, p. 300) explain, "many comprehensive schools use a combination of mixed-ability classes and setting. Pupils are generally grouped in mixed-ability classes for registration and for some parts of the curriculum but are regrouped for some subjects". Nonetheless, the data reveals that setting is widespread in schools in England. This is not only the case in secondary schools, but also in primary schools, with many pupils as young as 6 or 7 being taught in sets for mathematics, English, and occasionally other subjects (Boaler *et al*., 2000; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes 2017).

The relationship between setting and achievement

The impact of setting on achievement is of interest in this review because it is the most commonly used justification by governments and teachers for adopting the practice in schools. As I explained in Chapter Two, successive UK governments have offered their support for setting as a means of driving up standards of achievement and optimising pupils' learning, motivation, and independence in schools (DfEE, 1997; DfES, 2005; Conservative Party, 2007, 2010). Notwithstanding this, an extensive body of research evidence (Kulik, 1991; Kulik & Kulik, 1982; 1987; 1992; Sørensen & Hallinan, 1986; Slavin, 1987, 1990, 1993; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Ireson *et al*., 2005; Creese & Isaacs, 2016) has disputed the educational benefits of the practice. Reviews of literature have indicated that there is no clear or incontrovertible evidence that setting, of itself, is positively related to academic achievement (Slavin, 1987, 1990; Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Hallam & Deathe, 2002; Coe *et al*., 2014). In his seminal synthesis of

education studies, Slavin (1987) found that there was no overall academic benefit of setting and streaming for pupils. Three years later, Slavin (1990) conducted a second meta-analysis and reported that setting and streaming neither raised nor lowered pupils' levels of achievement. Similarly, Kulik and Kulik's (1987, 1992) meta-analysis concluded that the effect of setting, streaming, and regrouping on academic achievement is minimal. Other studies and reviews (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998; Betts & Shkolnik, 2000a; Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004) have reported a negative effect of setting on levels of academic achievement, while others point to a small positive effect (Askew & Wiliam 1995; Ireson *et al*., 2002b; Schofield, 2010; Steenbergen-Hu *et al*., 2016).

There is accumulating evidence of a differential effect of ability grouping on pupils' academic achievement (Houtveen & Van de Grift, 2001, Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Robinson, 2008; Muijs & Dunne, 2010; Marks, 2012). Most studies indicate that any gains in academic achievement that might result from ability grouping are overwhelmingly limited to more able pupils. Hence, an averaging effect of ability grouping has been reported, where gains made by pupils in high ability groups are often more than offset by losses to those in average and low ability groups (Boaler, 1997a, 2013; Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998; Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004). For example, Wiliam and Bartholemew's (2004) analysis of the relationship between setting and mathematics GCSE examination performance in six secondary schools showed that the practice had a positive effect on the attainment of higher achieving pupils, but that this would come at the expense of depressed attainment outcomes for lower achieving pupils. Overall, in Wiliam and Bartholemew's (2004) research, pupils in the high ability set attained half a GCSE grade higher than they would have been expected to gain in the absence of setting and pupils in the low ability set scored half a grade lower than they would have been expected (Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004). These

expectations were based on Key Stage 3 test scores. In this regard, there was also evidence that setting produced an increase in the spread of attainment between pupils in the high and low ability sets. This conclusion is supported by numerous other studies in different parts of the world (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998; Feinstein & Symons, 1999; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2001; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Hallam & Ireson, 2007; Duckworth *et al*., 2009; Marks, 2012; Macqueen, 2008, 2013b; Hornby & Witte, 2014). Rather than raising overall attainment, these studies suggest that ability grouping raises the attainment levels of some high ability pupils only. There are, however, some exceptions to this pattern. In some cases, setting has been found to have little overall effect on the academic outcomes of pupils at any achievement level (Betts & Shkolnik, 2000a) and, in others, has been shown to impact positively on the academic outcomes of both high and low achieving pupils (Schofield, 2010). As one can see, it is a moot point whether ability grouping raises pupils' scholastic achievement. What certainly seems to be the case, however, is that there is very little empirical support for the frequent, and often unequivocal, assertions in policy documents and statements that ability grouping raises achievement. I return to this issue at the end of this chapter.

A perennial problem in research on ability grouping has been unravelling the effects of grouping structures and other mediating variables. The achievement outcomes of pupils have been shown to be affected by many factors which take place independently of, and interact with, classroom organisational structures. These include the size of classes, access to the curriculum, teacher and pupil expectations, and teaching and learning strategies (Boaler, 1997a; Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004; Blatchford *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012; Campbell, 2014; Nandrup, 2016; Gershenson *et al*., 2016). In this sense, it is overly simplistic to assume that ability grouping alone will lead to improvements or decrements in pupils' achievement. As Marks (2013, p. 42) cogently remarks, "it is partly what is done - by teachers and others - within

a structural organisation, as opposed to just the structural organisation, that matters". I discuss this point in more detail below.

The pedagogical consequences of setting

Research has explored some of the factors influencing pupils' achievement in ability grouping contexts (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Venkatrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Marks 2012, 2013). As indicated above, there is considerable evidence to indicate that pupils' achievement in ability grouped mathematics, English, and science lessons is the consequence of the interaction of several factors (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Venkatrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Marks 2012, 2013). More particularly, research has indicated that the changes in teaching methods brought about by ability grouping impact on pupils' attainment, motivation, and social skills (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004). For example, Boaler's (1997b) research with secondary school mathematics teachers revealed that they tended to respond to setting by embracing a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching in terms of content and pace. In this regard, to unpack how and why particular outcomes arise from setting, it is important to consider the kinds of teaching that takes place within different sets (Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004; Fitz *et al*., 2005).

Setting reportedly enables teachers to target their level of instruction to a narrower range of pupils in classes (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Marks, 2012). In practice, however, as Coe *et al*. (2014, p. 23) observe, it seems to "create an exaggerated sense of within-group homogeneity and between-group heterogeneity in the teacher's mind". This sense tends to override their

awareness of individual pupils' needs across the range of attainment (Boaler, 1997b; Boaler *et al*., 2000). In summarising the literature, Fitz *et al*. (2005, p. 57) observed that "sets encourage the perception that all pupils in a class are of similar ability, such that pedagogically important differences between individuals and subsets tend to be overlooked". For example, in research based on classroom observations and interviews with teachers in primary and secondary school mathematics, Boaler (1997a, 1997b), Boaler *et al*. (2000), and Marks (2012, 2013) found that setted lessons were conducted as though pupils were not merely similar, but identical, in terms of ability, learning style, and preferred ways of working. Teachers in these studies were less aware of the needs and abilities of individual pupils in their sets. This led them to pitch their lessons to an "imaginary average pupil who worked at a certain pace, in a certain way" (Boaler, 1997a, p. 593). All pupils within a set were given identical tasks to complete at a uniform pace, whether they found it easy or difficult (Boaler *et al*., 2000). In this way, pupils were not required to complete work at their own pace, but rather at the pace of the median pupils in their set (Ball, 1981; Boaler, 1997a; 1997b; Hallam *et al*., 2004b). Thus, while teachers of mixed-ability groups have been soundly criticised for pitching their lessons at the middle, there is also evidence that this practice occurs in sets.

Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) reported similar patterns in their study of setting practices in secondary school mathematics. In 150 classes observed, Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) noted that teachers tended to perceive pupils as members of an undifferentiated set. A consequence of this perception was that teachers failed to accommodate the educational needs of many pupils in the sets they taught. Teachers provided a limited form of instruction, where all pupils in the same set worked on the same materials and progressed in a standardised way, 'on mass' with no differentiation in terms of pace of progression. Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) concluded that the most pernicious effects of setting occur when "teachers use

traditional, teacher-directed whole-class teaching methods" (p. 289). This evidence has been corroborated by other studies (Hallam *et al*. 2002, 2004a). In research conducted by Hallam *et al*. (2002, 2004a), primary and secondary school teachers tended to homogenise their perceptions of pupils in classes using setting. Teachers felt that setting "took care of individual differences" (Winn & Wilson, 1983, p. 120). As such, they believed that differentiation was unnecessary within supposedly homogenous classes. Other teachers in the same studies suggested that, although differentiation was still necessary in classes using setting, the extent of this was considerably less than when pupils were not organised in sets. However, despite teachers claiming that a 'level' of differentiation in teaching was needed, in practice, like teachers in other studies (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Marks 2012, 2013), they tended to use uniform, whole-class teaching with no provision for differentiation.

The problems of setting associated with a lack of differentiation within any specific setted class are exacerbated by the tendency for teachers to have fixed and stereotypical expectations about pace and level of work appropriate to the learning capacities of pupils in high and low sets (Boaler *et al.*, 2000; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002). In Boaler *et al*.'s (2000) research, top set pupils were regarded as a unitary group who did not experience problems or mistakes and did not need help or time to think. In Boaler's (1997b) earlier work, the top set classroom environment was characterised by a fast pace, where pupils were expected to rush through learning materials without necessarily achieving understanding. Some top set pupils reported that their mathematical learning experiences were so stressful that they were unable to learn any mathematics. The teaching approach seen in Boaler's (1997b) study exposes pupils to rote learning orientations and surface learning, where they only acquire enough knowledge to complete tasks. Research suggests that such teaching methods preclude the development of

thinking, problem solving, and a deep understanding of the learning materials (Boaler, 1996, 1997b, 1997d, 1998; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004; Adams-Byers *et al*., 2004; Walsh *et al*., 2010; Finlayson, 2014). Indeed, in observations of mathematics teaching, Boaler, (1997b) discovered that pupils often learned a method without an understanding of how it might be used.

In contrast to the heightened expectations for pupils located in the top set, Boaler (1997a) and Boaler *et al*.'s (2000) research found that teachers had limited learning expectations for work with the bottom set. The pupils in the bottom set were perceived to be largely incapable of independent thought, and consequently copying from the board or textbooks dominated the majority of lessons. The fixed pace of the lesson was also a significant problem, as many pupils in the bottom set who had completed work in the first five minutes of the lesson sat and waited with nothing to do for the remainder (Boaler *et al*., 2000). The undifferentiated approach had considerable implications for the learning of pupils across the ability spectrum. With a small number of pupils serving as reference points for the speed of the class, some pupils were frustrated at having to wait for slower pupils to catch up, many found the pace of the class anxiety provoking and confusing, and others in the same set found the pace of working and high expectations motivating (Boaler *et al*., 2000; Hallam & Ireson, 2006; Row, 2016).

Contrary to the commonly held view that the pupils most advantaged by setting are those that are most able, the data reported here provides evidence that the pupils most advantaged are those who can assimilate material at a sustained high pace (Boaler *et al*., 2000). In Boaler's (1997a) research, a pupil's success and/or failure in a setted environment had more to do with their preferred learning style, pace of learning, and their ability to adapt to the demands of the

set in which they were placed, than their ability, attainment, and/or effort. Accordingly, anyone who deviated from the "prototype model pupil" (Boaler, 1997b, p. 173) was disadvantaged. Boaler (1997) and Boaler *et al*. (2000) noted that many teachers, across all sets, aimed provision at what they perceived as 'the level of the group', rather than the necessarily differential ability levels of individuals within the group. As Sukhnandan and Lee (1998, p. 47) assert, setting "ignores the fact that pupils' rates and styles of learning differ regardless of their levels of ability". Setting, as it is practiced, can thus be seen to support the learning experiences of a few pupils (e.g. those who learn at a fast pace and/or whose learning preference aligns with the teaching approach being used 'for the set') at the expense of many others (e.g. pupils who learn at a different pace and/or have preferences for other approaches).

Teachers' justifications for setting

Research has revealed that many factors influence teachers' decisions to implement setting in schools (Boaler, 1997a; Reay, 1998b; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001; Marks, 2012, 2014, 2016). It is clear, however, that there are variations among these factors based on the subjects that are taught. The oft-cited reason for implementing setting in primary and secondary school mathematics, English, and science lessons is to raise academic standards (Ball, 1981; Boaler, 1997a; Reay, 1998b; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001; Hallam & Ireson, 2003, 2005; Araújo, 2007; Marks, 2012, 2014). Secondary school mathematics and science teachers have also justified setting with reference to the exigencies of the tiered examination model operating at Key Stage 4 (Boaler, 1997a; Reay, 1998b; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001; Marks, 2012, 2014, 2016). Mathematics teachers in Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) study explained that pupils sat different tiered examinations in Key Stage 4. Setting was therefore implemented because of the necessity to deliver different curriculum to different groups of pupils. This was not of

concern for English teachers because pupils did not take tiered examinations in the subject (Gillborn & Youdell 2000). For mathematics teachers in studies by Boaler, (1997a) and Boaler *et al*. (2000), setting was a pragmatic response to the challenge of teaching pupils of varied abilities, attainments, and learning needs within a single class. Teachers suggested that the creation of homogeneous groups enabled pupils to have their needs met more effectively, particularly using a whole-class teaching approach (Boaler, 1997a; Boaler *et al*., 2000). The upshot of this was that mathematics lessons were easier to plan and deliver because pupils were perceived to be of similar ability levels (Boaler, 1997a; Boaler *et al*., 2000). Other studies have similarly reported that teachers tend to adopt setting because teaching is easier (Whitburn, 2001; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004; Araújo, 2007; Muijs & Dunne; 2010; Marks, 2012; Taylor *et al*., 2017). Other reasons for using setting in mathematics, English, and science lessons have included an ethos of ability grouping in the school (Hallam & Ireson, 2003; 2005), parental pressures (Reay, 1998b; Araújo, 2007), and school size (Ball, 1981; Hamilton & O'Hara, 2011; Dunne *et al*., 2011).

The allocation of pupils to sets

One aspect of setting that has received little research attention is the ways in which setting decisions are made. I specifically highlight this issue because of the indication that follows, that there is a lack of pupil mobility between sets (Tronya & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Davies *et al*., 2003; Hallam & Ireson, 2006, 2007; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012; Row, 2016; Taylor *et al*., 2018). This points to the significance of pupils' initial allocation to a set in relation to how they are positioned within the school system and the sorts of learning opportunities that they will have access to. It also highlights the need for critical

investigations of the processes and criteria associated with setting decisions in different school subjects.

Research evidence indicates that most primary and secondary school teachers use a variety of assessment data sources to determine the allocation of pupils to sets (Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Davies *et al*., 2003; Araújo, 2007; Muijs & Dunne, 2011; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012; Taylor *et al*., 2018) More specifically, research has reported that teachers frequently draw on internal and external test and examination results in decisions about setting (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Davies *et al*., 2003; Araújo, 2007; Muijs & Dunne, 2011; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012). These include internal school examinations and Key Stage test results. Many of these procedures are consistent across different primary and secondary schools. For example, in the research reported here, the use of test and examination results predominated as the means by which teachers were assigning pupils to sets (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Araújo, 2007; Muijs & Dunne, 2011; Taylor *et al*., 2018). However, practice has been shown to vary slightly between curriculum subjects in secondary schools. Ireson *et al*. (2002) observed that there was greater use of test and examination results in mathematics and science than in English, where there was less setting. Research has also shown that some teachers draw on their own observational assessments, sometimes in conjunction with tests and examinations, to form sets (Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Davies *et al*., 2003; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012). Primary and secondary school mathematics, English, and science teachers in research by Davies *et al*. (2003), Dunne *et al*. (2011), and Marks (2012) described their observational assessments as ongoing and as including decisions related to pupils' classwork, homework, attitude, potential, attendance, punctuality, and coursework.

Muijs and Dunne's (2011) survey of the determinants of set placement in 44 secondary schools indicated that prior attainment was the main factor in allocating pupils to mathematics and English sets. Most mathematics (88.7%) and English (72.8%) teachers reported making setting decisions based on pupils' achievement and attainment data. Fewer mathematics (11%) and English (22.7%) teachers were using ability as the basis for decision making. While this figure might seem low, research has demonstrated that some teachers tend to conflate ability and attainment (Marks, 2012, 2013; Wilkinson *et al*., 2016). In this regard, the actual percentages for this criterion might be higher than reported. Only 4.5% of English and 2.3% of mathematics teachers in Muijs and Dunne's (2011) study mentioned other factors, including attitude, friendships, and behaviour, as influencing pupils' set allocation. Consistent with the findings of Muijs and Dunne (2011), Dunne *et al*.'s (2011) survey of 170 primary and secondary schools revealed that previous attainment was the key criterion for set placement in mathematics and English classes. Again, mathematics and English teachers referred to ability as a criterion for allocating pupils to specific sets, however, almost universally, this was mentioned alongside prior attainment and/or test results (Dunne *et al*., 2011). 8.1% of primary and 6.6% of secondary school English and mathematics teachers also cited pupils' behaviour and attitudes as factors taken into consideration when determining setting assignments (Dunne *et al*., 2011).

The extent to which non-attainment-related factors are used to form sets is subject to debate. Ireson *et al*.'s (2002a) survey of 84 secondary schools showed that pupils' behaviour, motivation, effort, self-esteem, and social relationships were sometimes considered in setting decisions in mathematics, English, and science classes, although to a lesser extent than ability and attainment. This finding adds weight to suggestions (Muijs & Dunne, 2011; Dunne *et al*., 2011) that ability and attainment are the key variables used to determine pupils' set placement. However, there are some contrasts to be noted. In her case study of a comprehensive secondary

school, Araújo (2009, p. 610) observed that "decisions on the allocation of pupils into sets were, to a significant extent, based on perceptions of attitudes and behaviour, considered as at least as important as academic attainment". Similarly, at the primary level, Davies *et al*. (2003) and Hallam and Parsons (2013a) reported that behaviour was a significant predictor of set placement, with pupils with behaviour problems regularly consigned to low ability sets, sometimes irrespective of their ability and prior attainment. Notably, these pupils were also more likely to be identified as having special educational needs [SEN] (Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). This strategy marked an attempt to ameliorate poor behaviour but simply concentrated pupils with disruptive behaviour in one class (Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). In other cases, schools have reported allocating certain pupils with behavioural difficulties to higher sets (Ireson *et al*., 2003; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). There were two principal reasons for this approach: first, to separate problematic combinations of pupils to avoid the formation of unmanageable classes; and, second, to provide disruptive pupils with positive role models who could promote positive behaviour (Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Dunne *et al*., 2011). Ireson *et al*. (2002) observed, however, that this led to many pupils being placed in sets "higher than their ability alone would justify" (p. 169). Consequently, where schools construct sets based on behaviour, this is likely to result in inappropriate set placement for some pupils (Hallam & Ireson, 2007).

Research has also suggested that class size can have a bearing on pupils' assignment to sets (Hallinan & Sørensen, 1983; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Venkatrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012; Macqueen, 2013a; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). As I note in more detail later in this chapter, lower sets are often smaller in size to help teachers target additional support and attend more closely to the learning needs of lower ability pupils (Hallinan & Sørensen, 1983; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Venkatrishnan & Wiliam, 2003;

Dunne *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012; Macqueen, 2013a; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). For example, primary and secondary teachers in Dunne *et al*.'s (2011) and Hallam and Parson's (2013a) research reported that borderline pupils would invariably be placed in the high set in mathematics, English, and science to restrict the size of the low set in these classes. This had negative consequences for some of these pupils because the higher set required them to work at a pace and level unsuited to their academic needs (Dunne *et al*., 2011; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). As Marks (2012, p. 116) explains, the impact is that some pupils are "allocated to particular sets when their scores could easily place them in a different group with its incumbent different experiences and expectations".

It is popular belief that ability is the defining criterion for placement in sets. Research findings reveal that setting decisions are "clearly not made on this basis alone" (Dracup, 2014, para. 5). In the research reviewed, ability was a relatively poor predictor of set placement in primary and secondary school mathematics, English, and science classes (Davies *et al*., 2003; Araújo, 2009; Muijs & Dunne, 2011; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a; Taylor *et al*., 2018). In many cases, prior attainment was the principal criterion employed by teachers in the selection of pupils to sets in these subjects (Davies *et al*., 2003; Muijs & Dunne, 2011; Dunne *et al*., 2011). Attainment was not the sole determinant of set placement decisions. Instead, results showed that the formation of sets was influenced by a complex combination of factors besides ability and attainment. These factors included pupils' demographic, behavioural, and social characteristics, as well as schools' organisational processes.

The use of multiple and diffuse criteria holds consequences for the homogeneity of the sets formed within any school (Hallinan & Sørensen, 1983; Boaler, 1997a; Marks, 2012). It is not

uncommon for researchers to find setted classes containing pupils with a wide variation in ability and attainment. It is thus problematic to assume and treat pupils identified within a specific set as homogenous. Macintyre and Ireson's (2002) research on the consistency between primary school pupils' measured mathematics ability and set placement, for example, revealed "considerable overlap between the standardised test scores of pupils in the high, middle and low ability sets" (p. 254). Given that set placement can have profound and wide-ranging implications for pupils, including placing a limit on their examination entry at Key Stage 4, it is concerning that pupils are, in many cases, allocated to sets on factors not related to ability and/or attainment. This problem is, as I explain next, further compounded by the fact that set placements are demonstrably affected by factors related to social class, ethnic origin, disability, and age.

Research on ability grouping has long shown that setting is socially divisive (Esposito, 1973; Tronya & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Gillborn & Gipps, 1996; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). There has been an over-representation of particular social groups in low ability classes in many countries. Indeed, considerable evidence has indicated that socially disadvantaged, disabled, and ethnic minority pupils are, almost without exception, more likely to be placed in low ability classes than in high ability classes (Jackson, 1964; Winn & Wilson, 1983; Oakes, 1985; Peak & Morrison, 1988; Commission for Racial Equality [CRE], 1992; Taylor, 1993; Tronya & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Gillborn & Gipps, 1996; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Wilson, 2000; Davies *et al*., 2003; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Araújo, 2005; Muijs & Dunne, 2010; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Archer *et al*., 2018). For example, Dunne *et al*.'s (2011) analysis of predictors of set allocation showed that social class (as defined by free

school meal [FSM][15] eligibility) was a strong determinant of set placement. Dunne *et al*. (2011, p. 506) noted that "pupils from low socio-economic status [SES] backgrounds had a higher probability of being placed in lower sets irrespective of prior attainment". By contrast, "pupils from higher SES backgrounds were more likely to be assigned to higher sets and less likely to be assigned to lower sets". The same trend was also reported for pupils registered with SEN. Dunne *et al*. (2011) indicated that fewer than 10% of pupils in the high ability set were identified with SEN, and that the "vast majority" were concentrated in the low ability set.

Similar patterns of inequality are also evident in relation to other social groups. Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) in-depth analysis of two secondary schools in England reported that African-Caribbean pupils were four times less likely to be in the top set than their white peers in mathematics, English, and science. Pupils who receive support in English as a second language [ESL] have also been found to be over-represented in low ability sets, especially in literacy and literacy-related subjects (Davies, *et al*., 2003; Araújo, 2005; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Archer *et al*., 2018). There is also evidence that low ability classes often contain a disproportionately high number of boys and summer born pupils (Jackson 1964; Douglas, 1964; Barker Lunn, 1970; Troyna & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Ireson *et al*., 2002b; Araújo, 2009; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a; Campbell, 2014; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). For example, Hallam and Parson's (2013a) survey of the relationship between setting placement and pupil characteristics revealed that gender and age were significant predictors of set placement in primary schools. Results suggested that, after controlling for social class and prior attainment, the best predictor of being in the top set for Key Stage 2[16] literacy and mathematics

[15] Free school meals are a "common proxy measure to indicate family poverty" (Gillborn & Youdell, 2001, p. 71).
[16] In England, Key Stage 2 is the four years of primary school education (Year 3, Year 4, Year 5 and Year 6), when students are aged between 7 and 11.

classes was being born in autumn (the early part of the school year). Although less has been written about why younger pupils in the year group are over-represented in low ability sets, this may relate to cognitive precocity. That is, pupils born in September, the first month of the academic year, have up to an 11-month advantage in maturation over their peers born in July, the last month of the academic year. To this point, several studies have indicated that teachers perceive older pupils as more capable, motivated, and hardworking than younger pupils in the same year group (Wilson, 2000; Felouzis & Charmillot, 2013; Campbell, 2014). Hallam and Parsons (2013a) noted that the measures predicting being in the bottom set for Key Stage 2 literacy and mathematics classes were being a boy and being born in summer (the later part of the school year). Not all evidence, however, points to such a causal effect. Dunne *et al*.'s (2011) research failed to show a statistically significant association between gender/age and set membership in schools.

This disproportionate grouping has been explained by teachers' differential expectations of particular groups of pupils (Tronya & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001; Araújo, 2005, 2007; Muijs & Dunne, 2010; Archer *et al*., 2018). Teachers' expectations about pupils' ability, effort, motivation, behaviour, and their interrelationships, have been shown to be skewed by stereotypes and biases related to social class, gender, age, disability, and ethnicity (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Studies by several authors provide evidence that setting decisions are often influenced by racialised gender stereotypes (Tronya & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001; Araújo, 2005, 2007; Muijs & Dunne, 2010). For example, teachers in studies by Gillborn and Youdell (2000) and Araújo (2005) perceived some ethnic minorities, particularly boys, as likely to present disciplinary problems and/or as having the wrong attitude towards education. Accordingly, they were less likely to assign these pupils to the high ability set in case they disrupted work in these classes (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000;

Araújo, 2005). Gillborn and Youdell (2000, p. 75) have also reported that ESL pupils tended to be placed in lower ability sets on the "misconception that difficulties with English are symptomatic of deeper-seated learning difficulties". A similar pattern has been shown for pupils with SEN. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) noted that teachers' setting decisions were often intricately interwoven with deficit beliefs about pupils' ability and attainment. Pupils statemented as having SEN were viewed by teachers as unlikely to achieve academically and, accordingly, were disproportionately placed in lower ability classes. Gillborn and Youdell (2000), however, offered another explanation for the use of SEN as an allocative criterion. They noted that some teachers grouped SEN pupils together in the low ability set to maximise access to support staff. In principle, by concentrating teaching support assistants in the low ability class additional learning support could be more precisely targeted to SEN pupils. However, while this strategy represented a genuine attempt to help pupils in need of additional support, Gillborn and Youdell (2000) observed that it inadvertently excluded SEN pupils from higher tier examinations at Key Stage 4.

Setting can also be critiqued in terms of its direct and indirect consequences for social inclusion, equity, and equality of opportunity. There is substantial research evidence to suggest that setting and tiering often reproduce and extend social inequalities. Tiering[17] is used here to denote the process by which teachers allocate pupils to a difficulty level (tier) of an examination at Key Stage 4 (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001). In England, setting and tiering decisions are often interrelated, with pupils in top set classes entered in the highest tier examinations and

[17] English and Science GCSE exams are formally examined in two tiers: foundation and higher. Pupils entered for the higher tiered exams have access to grades A* to D. However, any pupil who takes a higher exam and does not get at least a D attains a U grade. Those pupils entered for the foundation paper in GCSE Science and English have access to grades C-G. In 2006 GCSE Mathematics changed from a three-tier system; foundation (D-G); intermediate (B-E); and higher (A* to C) to the standard two tiers outlined above. In the three-tiered system pupils entered for the foundation Mathematics exams could not achieve a C grade.

pupils in the bottom set classes entered in the lowest. The dual process of setting and tiering is likely to reinforce inequities in educational attainment, since already disadvantaged groups of pupils are persistently found in low ability classes and are more likely to be entered in the lowest tier examinations (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Youdell, 2004; Gillborn, 2008; Schofield, 2010). This has particularly serious implications for pupils' attainment across a range of subjects, especially at Key Stage 4, as being placed in a low ability class limits their access to the best pass grades in examinations (Tronya & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004). Evidence has suggested that the lack of mobility between sets exacerbates this situation, with already disadvantaged groups of pupils locked in a cycle of low attainment (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Dunne *et al*., 2011).

In studying the relationship between setting and social inequalities, researchers have tended to limit their inquiry to highly formalised grouping processes, where pupils are allocated to sets based on their results in tests and examinations. Although Hallam *et al*. (2008) found that set placements in practically based subjects were invariably based on classifications derived from academic subject groupings, in subjects where there are no requisite exams, the allocation of pupils to sets is the responsibility of individual teachers. Moreover, tiering requires teachers to make firm and informal judgements about pupils' abilities, set placement, predicted grades, and ultimately examination entries (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001). What counts as ability in the minds of teachers is therefore likely to play a critical role in the differentiating processes of pupils within schools. Assessment is thus likely to include subjective appraisals of pupils' capacity against standards and criteria, inherent in which are embedded, and invariably narrow, views about what signifies ability (Hay, 2008; Hay & Penney, 2012; Tidén *et al*., 2017). These appraisals are often influenced by stereotypical expectations of ability. Indeed, there is a

substantial body of evidence showing that categories of ability and predicted grades often reflect inferences based on pupils' gender, class, age, and ethnic origin (Tronya & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004). In this regard, it is a matter of concern that research on ability grouping, both in England and internationally, has raised so few questions about the nature of ability, how abilities are recognised and established through, for example, teachers' assessments approaches, and the potentially limited/flawed conception of ability that is informing these measures/judgements (Wright & Burrows, 2006; Penney & Hay, 2008; Hay & Penney, 2012). The work of Gillborn and Youdell (2000, 2001), Hamilton (2010), Marks (2012, 2013), Croston (2014), and Archer *et al*. (2018) are notable exceptions in research on setting. As Hamilton (2010, p. 412) asserts, "the significance of ability in education cannot be underestimated. The concept of ability permeates policy documents, the organisation of learning in schools and teacher judgements in classrooms". In the absence of research evidence, however, little is known about how social criteria, such as teachers' values and assumptions about the nature of ability, enter into the selection process in school curriculum contexts, and how testing processes - purportedly used to gauge an objective measure of ability - encode and endorse expressions of ability (Miah & Rich, 2006). By questioning the socially and artificially determined practices of teachers, including how they group or stratify pupils by ability in a range of subjects, we can develop a more sophisticated understanding of how and why the abilities of certain pupils and/or groups of pupils are benefited or harmed in setting decisions in schools.

Movement of pupils between sets

The importance of pupils being able to transition between sets has been stressed as a critical factor in the effective operation of the practice in primary and secondary schools (Slavin, 1986,

1987; Ofsted, 1998, 2013; Davies *et al*., 2003; Ireson *et al*., 2005; Hallam & Ireson, 2007). As Ireson *et al*. (2005, p. 457) assert, one of the "main considerations in any grouping system should be to provide sufficient flexibility so that pedagogies and groupings may be aligned to meet the changing needs and abilities of young people as they grow and develop". However, although flexibility is emphasised in assumptions about setting, in practice, this does not appear to be the case. Though not unequivocal, a corpus of research evidence in primary and secondary school mathematics, English, and science classrooms has indicated that once sets have been formed, they rarely enable movement (Tronya & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Whitburn, 2001; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Davies *et al*., 2003; Hallam & Ireson, 2006, 2007; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012, 2016; Row, 2016; Taylor *et al*., 2018). Notably, this is even though most of the mathematics, English, and science teachers in these studies emphasised the importance of pupils being able to move between sets if/when achievement outcomes changed.

There is some evidence to show that pupils can move between sets (Ball, 1981; Ireson *et al*., 2005; Smith & Sutherland, 2006; Marks, 2012, 2013). However, research has consistently suggested that this movement is infrequent and, in most cases, confined to downward movement. For example, secondary school mathematics teachers in Boaler's (1997a, p. 579) research reported that it was "rare for more than two or three pupils to move sets in one year". Several other studies have similarly documented that the amount of movement between sets is very small (Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Araújo, 2007; Marks, 2012, 2016; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). In Ireson *et al*.'s (2002a) research, secondary school mathematics, English, and science teachers reported that "only a few pupils moved between sets". Ireson *et al*.'s (2002a) research also drew attention to the temporal dimensions of movement. Indeed, Ireson et al (2002a) observed that pupils were only moved between sets at particular junctures in the school year. Mathematics, English, and science teachers asserted that there was greater potential for

mobility in the lower school (Years 7-9) than the upper school (Years 10-11). Nonetheless, mobility between sets was rare in the first three years of secondary schooling and reduced further in the last two years of compulsory schooling. Similar results have been reported in research by Gillborn & Youdell, (2000), Davies *et al*. (2003), Ireson *et al*. (2005), and Araújo, (2007). For example, teachers in Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) study stated that movement between sets was not feasible beyond Year 10 as this was the point in time when examination courses began to operate. Additionally, primary and secondary school mathematics, English, and science teachers in Davies *et al*.'s (2003), Ireson *et al*.'s (2005), and Araújo's (2007) research suggested that any movement between sets was most likely to take place at the beginning and/or end of each term, as this was when assessment results were known. Ireson *et al*. (2002), Davies *et al.* (2003), and Araújo's (2007) research suggested, however, that set movement resulted more from pupils' behaviour than their ability, learning, and development. Primary and secondary school mathematics, English, and science teachers recounted that they would often punish disruptive behaviour in the top set by demoting offending pupils to a lower set (Ireson *et al*., 2002; Davies *et al*., 2003; Araújo, 2007). This finding has also been reported in the earlier research of Ball (1981) and Hallinan and Sørensen (1983). This practice has potential implications for pupils' learning opportunities, particularly for those in the lower set. As I explained earlier in this chapter, the practice may have the effect of concentrating misbehaving pupils in the lower set. This has been shown to have an adverse impact on the learning and development of pupils in the lower set (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Ireson *et al*., 2002b; Marks, 2012; Croston, 2014).

The data reviewed suggests that any movement that takes place between sets is accounted for negatively (e.g. due to challenging behaviour) than positively (e.g. due to good behaviour, effort and progress). The research also reveals that ability is not a major consideration in

moving pupils between sets. However, a substantial body of research has shown that flexible setting arrangements are constrained by operational and strategic factors. These factors include, but are not limited to, space (Whitburn, 2001; Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Davies *et al*., 2003; Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003), timetabling (Davies *et al*., 2003; Taylor *et al*., 2018), and monitoring of set placements (Ofsted, 1998; Ireson *et al*., 2002b; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Davies *et al*., 2003; Hallam & Ireson, 2003). For example, primary and secondary school mathematics, English, and science teachers in Davies *et al*.'s (2003) and Venkatakrishnan and Wiliam's (2003) research reported difficulties in moving pupils from one set to another because of a lack of available space. Previous research has reported that class size is a consideration when teachers decide on pupil groupings (Hallinan & Sørensen, 1983; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Venkatrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012; Macqueen, 2013a; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). As Macqueen (2013a, p. 12) explains, the high ability group is often "made artificially large" to allow the low ability group to be smaller. Teachers generally consider lower ability groups to be more reliant on them for instruction, guidance, and support (Marks, 2012, Rubie-Davies, 2015; Weaver *et al*., 2016; Wright, 2017). In theory, smaller groups thus provide a higher teacher-pupil ratio which provides more scope for teachers to attend to pupils' individual needs (Hallinan & Sørensen, 1983; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Macqueen, 2013a). Venkatrishnan and Wiliam (2003) and Dunne *et al*. (2011) noted, however, that this approach was problematic, since there was no space to accommodate an increase in pupil numbers in the high ability group. This provides another reason for the lack of movement between sets.

Previous research has also reported that there is an absence of systems in place to facilitate the reassignment of pupils to sets and the ongoing review of their progress and achievement as a basis for correct set placement (Ireson *et al*., 2002; Davies *et al*., 2003; Dunne *et al*., 2011).

Ireson *et al*. (2002), Davies *et al*. (2003), and Dunne *et al*. (2011) found that only a few primary and secondary schools in their samples adequately tracked pupils' set placement and progress, and/or recorded the number of pupils who had moved between sets in different subjects. Even when teachers suspected that pupils were wrongly allocated to sets, subsequent adjustment was therefore unlikely because they were unable to provide evidence to support this notion (Ireson *et al*., 2002; Davies *et al*., 2003; Dunne *et al*., 2011).

The limitations placed on teachers by tiered examinations have also been reported as an issue in them being able to enact a flexible policy of setting (Boaler *et al*., 2000; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001; Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004; Marks, 2014 2016). In the English education system, pupils choose to study GCSE and/or Business and Technology Education Council [BTEC][18] qualifications across a range of subjects in Years 9/10 and 11 (aged 13-16). However, as Gillborn and Youdell (2000, p. 209) explain, GCSE examinations themselves contribute to "wider processes of differentiation" that separate pupils and expose them to different types of knowledge. Indeed, the allocation of pupils to sets in Year 9/10 has an important bearing on the curriculum route they will follow and, ultimately, the grades they will have access to when they sit their GCSE examinations. Top set lessons are related "directly and explicitly" (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 117) to the higher-tier GCSE examination paper and bottom set lessons to the lower-tier GCSE examination paper. Accordingly, pupils in different sets in Years 9/10 and 11 do not follow a common curriculum or take the same examinations. Given the nature and extent of curriculum differentiation across sets, several mathematics, English, and science teachers in research by Gillborn and Youdell (2000), Boaler *et al*. (2000), Macintyre and Ireson (2002), and Hallam and Ireson (2007) reported that vertical mobility between sets was difficult

[18] BTECs are vocational, work-related qualifications.

and, for some, unworkable. This was because a pupil transferring up would not have covered the equivalent material required for the higher-tier set. Teachers would have to invest considerable time and effort to bring the pupil to parity with those in the class they were joining. The additional instructional demands that this would make on teachers seems to be a deterrent against upward set mobility. Indeed, teachers in previous research (Hallinan & Sørensen, 1983; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001) have suggested that the limitations on their time made such remediation efforts difficult. For this reason, teachers tended to avoid moving pupils from the bottom set to the top set.

The pace at which different sets are taught has also restricted upward movement. As noted earlier in this chapter, lower sets tend to proceed at a slower pace and, in some instances, are taught a diluted curriculum which covers a broad range of topics, but to a lesser degree. A difference in pacing and instruction, however, progressively widens the gap between the work that pupils in the low and high ability sets have undertaken (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Hallam & Ireson, 2007; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). Accordingly, as Rosenbaum (1980) contends, one might suspect that this would result in a situation in which pupils "could be moved downward to a lower ability group if they had difficulty but could not be moved upward to a higher ability group if they did well, because of escalating deficiencies created by the system" (p. 368). Mathematics teachers in Boaler *et al.*'s (2000) research claimed that upward set movement was avoided to prevent pupils feeling like they were too far behind to catch up with their peers. Teachers have also been shown to restrict downward set movement for fear of damaging pupils' confidence, levels of motivation, and self-esteem (Ball, 1981; Venkatrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Hamilton & O'Hara, 2011; Macqueen, 2013b).

Several research studies (Newbold, 1977; Hallinan & Sørensen, 1983; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Davies *et al*., 2003; Dunne *et al*., 2011) have reported that teachers express concern about the resultant social implications of moving pupils away from their friends. As Hallinan and Sørensen (1983, p. 842) explain, pupils "tend to form friendships with formal groups. When teachers move pupils from one ability group to another, they may disrupt informal social groups of considerable importance" to the pupil. In this regard, teachers in research conducted by Hallinan and Sørensen (1983, 1985) and Dunne *et al*. (2011) reported that most pupils did not want to change sets even when they were given the opportunity to do so. Hallinan and Sørensen's (1983, 1985) research draws attention to the ways in which pupils resisted transfers between sets. Pupils resisted change overtly and even covertly by refusing to move from one set to another and/or by routinely disguising their 'actual' ability level when it served as the basis for movement into the high set (Hallinan & Sørensen, 1983, 1985). However, competing evidence is found in the literature. More recent research (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Hallam & Deathe, 2002; Hallam *et al*., 2004b; Hallam & Ireson, 2007; Croston, 2014; Marks, 2014; Taylor *et al*., 2018) has revealed a substantial proportion of pupils wanting to move to a different set to attain better grades, receive easier work, or work at a quicker pace.

Although signalled as a radical departure from its predecessor streaming, it appears that setting embodies one of the most harmful features of streaming - its inflexibility. Notably, in the context of the research reviewed here, this inflexibility derived more from social, curriculum, and resource factors, than a lack of will or desire on the part of teachers (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Ireson *et al*., 2005). This lack of mobility between sets makes the initial selection of sets critical in relation to pupils' learning futures. This point is reaffirmed by Gamoran's (1986) and Ireson *et al*.'s (2002) finding that pupils' previous set placement in primary schools can influence their subsequent set placement in secondary schools. Given the lack of movement

between sets, it is conceivable that pupils placed in a low set at an early age, and characterised as lacking ability, will continue to be placed in a low set throughout their school years.

A critique of setting research

Research on setting has, with few exceptions, used the set rather than individuals making up the set, as its unit of analysis. Consequently, many studies on setting have failed to engage with the diverse and contradictory experiences of pupils within, as well as between, sets (Esposito, 1973; Kulik & Kulik, 1982; 1987; 1992; Rowan & Miracle, 1983; Kulik, 1985; Sørensen & Hallinan, 1986; Houtveen & Van de Grift, 2001, Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Robinson, 2008). It is worth remembering that setting is never a straightforward and unproblematic process. Thus, while research has generally demonstrated that high ability pupils are advantaged by setting, that advantage does not extend to 'all' high ability pupils (Boaler 1997a; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Hallam & Ireson, 2006). It is also unlikely that all high and low ability pupils will experience or be affected by setting in the same way. As Boaler (1997a, p. 593) rightly argues, "it is too simplistic to regard the effects of setting as universally good or bad for all pupils, even pupils in the same set". In addition, by focussing attention on pupils at both extremes of the ability range (high ability and low ability) and conflating these with what is a spread of achievement towards either end of a continuum, the variation in the middle is often overlooked. As a result, we know very little about how pupils in the middle experience setting. Future research should conceptualise the 'individual' in the process to provide more nuanced, contextual understandings of pupils' experiences of setting. I outline my contribution to these issues in Chapter Four.

Setting and PE

In research exploring the prevalence of setting, art, music, drama, and PE have tended to be grouped together as 'practically based subjects' (Ofsted, 1998; Hallam *et al*., 2008). With this conflation of various subjects, where PE has been included in research on setting, data presented has been limited in both quantity and scope. Nevertheless, evidence from this small body of research suggests that pupils are rarely set by ability in PE. In Ofsted's (2001) annual report of 698 secondary schools in England, only 11% of the PE lessons observed by inspectors were taught in sets. Similarly, Hallam *et al*.'s (2008) survey of 97 PE teachers from 45 mixed-gender secondary comprehensive schools in England reported that the incidence of setting was relatively low in PE. Hallam *et al*.'s (2008) survey findings indicated that in 14% of cases, mixed-ability grouping in Year 7 was followed by setting in Year 8 and Year 9. In the remaining cases, some combination involving setting, banding, and mixed-ability grouping was in operation. In this sense, setting was not used across the whole of the PE curriculum. In the same study, the majority (83%) of PE teachers thought that mixed-ability grouping was suitable in PE. However, approximately one third (31%) of PE teachers surveyed indicated a preference for some form of ability grouping after Year 7 - 22% in Year 8 and Year 9, and 9% in Years 7, 8, and 9 (Hallam *et al*., 2008). Although some PE teachers stated that they wanted to organise pupils into sets, where setting was implemented in PE, it was often determined by whole-school grouping policies. That is, when pupils arrived at PE, they would do so in sets based on their attainment in academic subjects (mathematics, English, and science), with the result that pupils within any given set in PE were often at very different levels of 'PE ability' (Hallam *et al*., 2008). Pupils were therefore not specifically set by 'PE ability', and a major source of frustration for PE teachers was that setting decisions based only on the perceived needs of academic subjects were being imposed in their school. Not all the evidence supports the pattern reported by Ofsted (1998, 2001) and Hallam *et al*. (2008). Penney and Houlihan's

(2003) national survey of 101 specialist sports colleges[19] in England revealed that setting was a common arrangement in PE at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 but was more common at Key Stage 4.

At the time of conducting the literature review, there were no recent statistics on the extent of setting in PE. In this regard, prior to conducting this study, I conducted a preliminary survey of setting practices in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 PE in 155 schools in the North East of England (Wilkinson *et al*., 2016). The findings revealed that setting was widespread, with 61.9% of responding schools reporting that they used the practice in PE. The incidence of setting varied in different year groups. 77.1% of schools using setting in PE were doing so in Year 7, 94% in Year 8, 87.8% in Year 9, 51.5% in Year 10, and 36.7% in Year 11. The survey also revealed a dimension of sex-differentiated ability grouping practice that has not previously been highlighted in the literature. One (1.2%) of the co-education schools using setting were doing so in girls' PE only and ten (11.6%) were using setting in boys' PE only.

To date, Croston's (2014) case study of a mixed-comprehensive secondary school in England remains the only study that includes substantial analysis of setting in PE. The PE department, which was the focus of the study, used setting across the whole of Key Stage 3. Setting was also retained at Key Stage 4, however, only in practical PE. The PE department's rationale for setting was to challenge pupils at their level of ability. Consonant with the claims of classroom-

[19] Specialist sports colleges were introduced as part of the Specialist Schools Programme [SSP] in 1997. The SSP encouraged secondary schools in England to specialise in certain fields of the curriculum to improve standards in education (DfEE, 1997, 2000, 2001). They have an identified mission to raise standards (academic and sporting) of performance and achievement in PE and sport for all their pupils across the ability range, increase participation in PE and sport for pre-and post-16-year olds, and develop the potential of talented performers (DfEE, 2000). Although the SSP ended in 2010, many schools in England have retained their SSC status.

based teachers (Araújo, 2007; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Hallam *et al*., 2004a), PE teachers also felt that having groups set by ability made their job easier in terms of planning and delivery. In deciding how to allocate pupils to sets, the PE department used two strategies. The first was to assess Year 7 pupils' core skills over a four-week period and thereafter place them in sets. The second was to teach Year 7 pupils in mixed-ability tutor groups and then assign them to sets at the beginning of Year 8. PE teachers in Croston's study suggested that the second strategy was more 'effective' because it enabled them to collect more assessment data on individual pupils. Both strategies involved "early identification and judgements about ability in PE" (Croston, 2014, p. 135). PE teachers' definitions of ability incorporated physical, cognitive, creative, and social skills. Nonetheless, PE teachers predominantly perceived ability in physical terms. Once assigned to a set, PE teachers in Croston's study indicated that movement was limited for all pupils. This trend is consistent with previous studies of setting in classroom-based subjects (Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Araújo, 2007; Marks, 2012, 2016). There were several reasons for this lack of movement. PE teachers emphasised that the consistency of the sets was important in helping pupils feel comfortable and familiar with each other. Additionally, there was a general belief that there was no appreciable change in pupils' ability levels across the school year. In this regard, any movement that occurred between sets was based on other factors, such as behaviour, attitude, and friendship, although this was rare. Similar findings have been reported in mathematics, English, and science lessons (Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Marks, 2014; Taylor *et al*., 2018). Croston (2014) concluded that pupils tended to remain in their respective sets "throughout their secondary school experience" (p. 155).

Despite the lack of mobility between sets, Croston (2014) noted that most pupils were very much in favour of setting in PE. Pupils' opinions about setting varied, however, according to their experiences and levels of ability. High ability pupils felt that they would be insufficiently

challenged working with less able pupils in mixed-ability groups. Setting, in contrast, provided a means for them to engage in more challenging tasks without being slowed down by less able pupils. The more able pupils had a limited awareness of the negative aspects of setting. Croston (2014, p. 139) surmised that this was "because they had not had any related experiences". The views of the less able pupils were slightly more mixed. They recognised the potential for setting to negatively impact their levels of motivation and potential achievement. Nonetheless, setting retained their support because they felt more comfortable working with others of a similar ability in PE. Croston (2014) also noted that pupils' perceptions of setting in PE were inextricably associated with their aspirations for the future. Many of the more able pupils emphasised the importance of being in the top set in PE because the subject was related to their aspirations to become PE teachers or to pursue PE related qualifications. As such, they attached great importance to being considered able in PE. In contrast, many of the less able pupils were unconcerned about being in the bottom set in PE because the subject did not relate to their aspirations or interests.

Further research is needed on the impact of setting on pupils' learning experiences. This research is especially important in performance-based subjects such as PE, where there is a practical dimension to knowledge and learning. PE is a distinct subject in the school curriculum in the sense that pupils are required to display their bodies and physical abilities to others (Evans & Davies, 1993; Garrett & Wrench, 2008; Fisette, 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that that if pupils perceive their ability level to be lower than others in the same PE lesson, then their self-esteem can be adversely affected (Hunter, 2004; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b). Hay and Macdonald's (2010a) analysis of ability-based practices within a senior secondary PE context has provided one of all too few vivid insights into not only the complexities of ability construction in and through pedagogical practices, but also the

pedagogical consequences for pupils who are differently positioned in relation to dominant conceptions of ability. These consequences encompassed pupils' sense of self, learning opportunities, and potential achievement. Perhaps there is value, therefore, in using setting in a subject where pupils' abilities are "on display and can be surveyed and judged by others" (Fisette, 2011, p. 180). The ability differences between pupils would be less pronounced and some pupils might feel more comfortable demonstrating their skills and abilities in front of others. This is an issue that calls for empirical investigation and is one that, along with others, I seek to address in this study.

Theoretical perspectives in the ability grouping literature

In this section of the chapter, I discuss the theoretical perspectives that have been used to study ability grouping. I use the term ability grouping rather than setting here because the research that is reported focuses on streaming, mixed-ability grouping, and setting. The purpose of this discussion is to make the reader aware that ability grouping has been explored from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including psychological and sociological, and to highlight the contribution of these perspectives to the understanding of ability grouping.

Much of the research on ability grouping in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s focused on the measurable educational outcomes of streaming and mixed-ability grouping (Svensson, 1962; Goldberg *et al*., 1966; Esposito, 1973; Thompson, 1974; Kulik & Kulik, 1982; 1987; 1992; Rowan & Miracle, 1983; Kulik, 1985; Sørensen & Hallinan, 1986; Slavin, 1987, 1990, 1993). This research drew primarily from psychological traditions to establish correlational or predictive relationships between streaming or mixed-ability grouping and pupils' achievement (Jacob, 1988; Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). In summarising the literature,

Rosenbaum (1980, p. 363) concluded that research had "studied ability grouping almost exclusively to ascertain its achievement outcomes". More recent psychological research has focused on the relationship between ability grouping and pupils' self-concept and self-esteem (Ireson *et al.*, 2001; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Hallam & Deathe, 2002; Boaler, 2005; Ireson & Hallam, 2009). Although psychological research has provided insight into the impact of ability grouping on pupils' achievement, self-concept, and self-esteem, it is not without criticism. The impact of ability grouping is complex, not least because causational conclusions are difficult to establish (Betts & Shkolnik, 2000b; Gard & Wright, 2005). Characterising the relationship between ability grouping and attainment in a linear, cause-and-effect manner, precludes the analysis of additional factors, including aspects of teaching and learning that mediate the effects of ability grouping on pupils' attainment (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Marks, 2012; Dracup, 2014).

Over the past three decades, researchers have increasingly used sociological perspectives to study ability grouping (Reay, 1998b; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001; Marks, 2012, 2014; Croston, 2014; Francis *et al*., 2017; Taylor *et al*., 2017). The advantage of this approach over the psychological approach is that it can be used to examine the influence of social structures on the thoughts, behaviours, and practices of teachers and pupils (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 1999; Crotty, 1998). Some of this sociological research has been grounded in a critical policy perspective (Gewirtz *et al*., 1993; Ball *et al*., 1994, 1996; Reay & Ball, 1997; Reay, 1998b; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001). The value of a critical policy perspective lies in its ability to make visible the complexities of the policy process in schools (Evans & Penney, 1994; Ball, 1997b). It can reveal the ways in which policies are appropriated and contextualised by teachers in their pedagogical practices and highlight the intended and unintended consequences of policy for teachers and pupils in schools (Ball, 1997b; Ball *et al*., 2012a; Tefera & Voulgarides,

2016). For example, Gewirtz *et al*. (1993) used a critical policy perspective to highlight the powerful role of market forces in shaping the ability grouping policies and practices of a secondary school in England.

Researchers have also drawn from Foucauldian (Marks, 2012; Francis *et al*., 2017) and Bourdieusian (Croston, 2014; Taylor *et al*., 2017) theoretical perspectives to study ability grouping. For example, Marks (2012) used a Foucauldian approach to critically examine how discourses of mathematical-ability impacted on teaching and learning in primary school mathematics sets. Marks (2012) found the Foucauldian theorisations of discourse and power to be particularly useful in understanding the meaning making of mathematics teachers in her study. In contrast, Croston (2014) used a Bourdieusian approach to explore how ability was configured and experienced in the field of PE. Croston (2014) suggested that Bourdieu's interrelated concepts of habitus, capital, and field afforded an understanding of how pupils experienced PE in relation to their possession of different kinds of capital. I discuss the ideas of Foucault in more detail in Chapter Four.

Conclusion

To summarise, although successive UK governments have justified setting on the basis that it benefits all pupils, there is no consistent evidence for the positive effects of setting in schools. Indeed, contrary to common assumptions, it seems highly plausible to suggest that setting engenders low achievement, resulting in a "situation where many pupils achieve well below their potential" (Boaler *et al*., 2000, p. 646). For example, pupils in Boaler's (1997b) study explicitly linked their setting restrictions to their own disillusionment, demotivation, and underachievement. The implication was that many pupils wanted to do well but were unwilling

to exert effort as their lowly set placement deprived them of access to higher-grade passes in examinations. Where studies report a positive effect of setting, it appears to be the case that this is typically limited to high achieving pupils who work at a fast pace.

The review also provides evidence that setting can increase the connection between pupils' social background and their secondary school attainment (Schofield, 2010; Dunne *et al*., 2011). Setting appears to contribute to the persistence and widening of inequalities, especially those associated with social class and ethnic origin (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). As Fitz *et al*. (2005) explain, setting produces hierarchies of ability "that are socially stratified by class, as well as by gender and ethnicity which build on advantages and disadvantages brought into the education system" (p. 57). The playing field beyond schools is far from 'level' and without acknowledgement of social disadvantage, setting will continue to reproduce prevailing inequities in the broader society (Evans & Bairner, 2013; Wilkinson, 2016). A continued commitment to setting by policymakers is thus questioned in light of extensive evidence exposing the inadequacies of setting for a pronounced range of learners. Contemporary practices of setting do not seem to have been informed by or grounded in what we know from systematic research and practice (Boaler, 1997b).

Francis *et al*. (2017, p. 2) applied a Foucauldian analysis of discourse to recent policy narratives to "propose potential explanations for the apparent lack of traction of existing research with education policy and teaching practice". Francis *et al*. (2017) suggested that the practices of ability grouping reflect historically hegemonic discourses of ability and ability grouping. These discourses reflect and (re)produce ability grouping as natural and desirable. Francis *et al*. (2017) explained that these historically hegemonic discourses are so firmly entrenched in

policy and practice that alternative accounts, including research evidence, are rendered "unintelligible" (p. 12). Francis *et al*. (2017) also pointed to the problematic nature of the term 'ability grouping', suggesting that the term confuses current attainment with notions of "innate potential academic ability" (p. 2). The conflation of educational attainment and innate potential, however, obscures a multitude of educational and organisational factors, including grouping policies and assessment mechanisms, that generate, differentiate and, in some cases, constrain the attainment of pupils in schools (Hart, 1998b; Wilkinson *et al*., 2013). In an educational climate where a lack of attainment is explained by low ability - as opposed to the inequitable effects of pedagogical and organisational practices - it becomes easier to understand why the discriminatory and exclusionary effects of setting generally go unquestioned and unchallenged in schools (Gillborn & Youdell, 2001; Wilkinson, 2016).

The continued use of setting in schools could also be explained by teachers' attitudes towards ability grouping. Prior research has demonstrated that teachers tend to have more positive attitudes towards homogeneous grouping than heterogeneous grouping (Jackson 1964, Barker-Lunn 1970; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Hallam *et al*., 2008; Marks, 2012). For the most part, as I explained earlier in this chapter, this is because teachers perceive homogeneous classes to be easier to teach than heterogeneous classes (Boaler *et al*., 2000; Whitburn, 2001; Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004; Araújo, 2007; Muijs & Dunne; 2010; Marks, 2012; Taylor *et al*., 2017). Some research has also shown that teachers are oblivious to research suggesting that setting has limited educational value (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Wiliam & Bartholemew, 2004; Hornby & Witte, 2014). In this sense, it might not simply be the case that teachers are disregarding the limitations of setting, but instead that they are largely unaware of them.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is threefold: first, to consider the research paradigm adopted in the study; second, to describe the theoretical framework used in the study; and, third, to explain how the research data were generated and analysed. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides a discussion of competing research paradigms in the physical and social sciences and their benefits and drawbacks. This discussion serves as the basis for justifying the research paradigm adopted in this study. The second section presents the theoretical framework adopted in the study and highlights how this was arrived at. The third section describes the research context, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and the criteria to judge the quality of the study.

Research paradigm

The practices used by researchers are shaped by their philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality and the different ways to acquire knowledge of that reality (Gergen, 1985, 1999; Hart, 1998b; Crotty, 1998; Nelson *et al*., 2014). These assumptions inform all aspects of the research process, including the type of research questions asked, the theoretical and methodological approach taken, and how the data were collected and analysed (Denzin, 1978; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999; Creswell, 2007; Leavy, 2014). In this regard, researchers are encouraged to reflect on, and make explicit, their philosophical assumptions. This is important so that they and others can more clearly understand and appreciate how they influenced the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Willig, 2008; Creswell & Plano

Clark, 2011; Bryman, 2015). Not all researchers share the same philosophical assumptions. In this regard, to provide a framework for explaining my own philosophical position, I consider the assumptions that underpin various research traditions. Before doing so, it is necessary to define three distinct but related elements: paradigm, ontology, and epistemology.

Patton (1978, p. 203) explains that a paradigm is "a world-view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. Paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialisation of adherents and practitioners: paradigms tell us what is important, legitimate, and reasonable". A paradigm spans ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell, 2007; Ritchie *et al*., 2014). Briefly, ontology is the nature of reality, epistemology is the relationship between that reality and the researcher, and methodology is the technique used by the researcher to gain knowledge about that reality (Healy & Perry, 2000). Crotty (1998, p. 4) explains that each element is "informed by the other". For example, our view of reality affects what we perceive to be knowledge of that reality and this in turn affects how we go about investigating that reality (Blaikie, 1993; Hart, 1998a; Creswell, 2007). This point is raised by Lincoln (1990, p. 81), who points out that "the adoption of a paradigm literally permeates every act even tangentially associated with inquiry, such that any consideration even remotely attached to inquiry processes demands rethinking to bring decisions into line with the worldview embodied". The methodological choices that researchers make should therefore be congruous with the philosophical assumptions of their paradigm (Hellison, 1988; Lincoln, 1990; Bryman, 2015). Four of the main paradigmatic positions are positivism, postpositivism, interpretivism, and poststructuralism. I discuss these in turn next.

The positivist paradigm

The positivist paradigm is rooted in a realist-external ontology, an objectivist epistemology, and a hypothetico-deductive methodology (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998). A realist-external ontology assumes that reality is singular, objective, observable, measurable, and independent of human cognition (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Giorgi, 1986; Creswell, 2007). Bracy (1996, p. 65) explains that in an objectivist epistemology, the researcher "adopts a distant stance from the object of inquiry to exclude biasing and confounding factors from influencing the outcome". In this regard, positivist researchers believe that it is possible to remain detached and objective from that which they are researching (Sparkes, 1992; Kim, 2003; Plack, 2005; Krauss, 2005). Positivists approach research from a hypothetico-deductive viewpoint (Patton, 1988; Bracy, 1996; Dana & Dana, 2005). The purpose of hypothetico-deductive research is to test pre-formulated hypotheses using objective measurement techniques (Patton, 2002; Dana & Dana, 2005; Myers, 2014). To support these hypotheses, positivist researchers seek to establish correlational or causal relationships between two or more sets of variables (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1999; Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Quantitative techniques tend to predominate in the positivist paradigm because their focus is on objective measurement (Patton, 1988; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Bryman, 2015). These techniques include questionnaires, structured interviews, secondary analysis of data, and experiments (Creswell, 2007; Bryman, 2015; Manning & Stage, 2016).

It is often argued that one of the principal benefits of a positivist approach is its objectivity (Sparkes, 1992; Ernest, 1994; Bryman, 2015). Objectivity is based on the notion that it is possible for researchers to operate from a distant, value-free position (Sparkes, 1992; Kim, 2003; Plack, 2005; Krauss, 2005). Positivist researchers often employ quantitative methods, including experimental designs, to test hypotheses with measurable data (Patton, 1988; Creswell, 2007; Bryman, 2015; Manning & Stage, 2016). In this regard, they suggest that their

research is devoid of bias in the data collection procedures and the interpretation of results (Sparkes, 1992; Ary *et al*., 2009; Bryman, 2015). Positivist researchers also use large representative samples to test hypotheses and draw generalised conclusions from their findings (Patton, 1988; Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Levy, 2006; Assalahi, 2015). Allan (1998, p. 52) explains that this means that "a finding in one situation can be predicted to recur in another given the same set of variables and conditions". The principle of generalisability makes positivist research valuable because findings can be extrapolated to a larger population or to a different setting (Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008; Sritanyarat *et al*., 2010; Assalahi, 2015).

The positivist paradigm has inherent weaknesses in its assumptions and approaches (Manning & Stage, 2016). First, a key tenet of the positivist paradigm is that it is possible to obtain hard, objective knowledge (Giorgi, 1986; Levy, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Bryman, 2015). As a result, positivist researchers believe that their research findings can be generalised to wider groups and contexts (Levy, 2003; Bryman, 2015; Assalahi, 2015). The process of generalisation, however, results in an inadequate understanding of the individual (Patton, 1988; Bryman, 2015; Manning & Stage, 2016). This point is articulated by Manning and Stage (2016, p. 26) who explain that "when findings are generalised to a large group of people, the range of what can be said about any one individual or small group narrows". Second, the positivist paradigm has been heavily criticised for overlooking the importance of subjective and contextual factors (Ernest, 1994; Henderson, 1990; Sparkes, 1992; Fox, 2008; Cushion & Kitchen, 2011). Henderson (1990) points out that research adopting the positivist paradigm "seeks factors or causes of social phenomena apart from subjective states and contends that truth is singular and external to the individual" (p. 171). The positivist paradigm also reduces complex social phenomena to controlled measurable variables (Sparkes, 1992; Cushion & Kitchen, 2011; Hussain *et al*., 2013). In doing so, positivist research is often abstract and largely insensitive to

the meanings and experiences of individuals in different social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Henderson, 1990; Sparkes, 1992; Fox, 2008; Cushion & Kitchen, 2011).

The postpositivist paradigm

In the second half of the twentieth century, there was growing criticism of the foundations of the positivist paradigm. Prominent philosopher of science Karl Popper (1959, 1962) questioned the positivist criterion of verification. Verification refers to the process of establishing the truth or validity of a hypothesis or theory (Popper, 1959, 1962; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nawrin & Mongkolsirikiet, 2012). Popper observed that "there may always be some potential observation or experiment that might demonstrate that what we had previously thought to be true was, in fact false" (Crossan, 2003, p 53). He argued, therefore, that research cannot necessarily prove a hypothesis or theory, only falsify it (Popper, 1959, 1962; Croson, 2002; Crossan, 2013). Popper proposed that the positivist criterion of verification should be replaced by a criterion of falsification (Nawrin & Mongkolsirikiet, 2012). Falsification is the process of using contrary evidence to disprove a hypothesis or theory (Popper, 1959, 1962; Creswell, 2003; Crossan, 2003). Popper (1959, 1962) and others, including Thomas Kuhn (1970) and Jacob Bronowski (1950, 1956), also challenged the positivist conception of truth and knowledge. They argued that definitive knowledge of reality was not fully possible or accessible because knowledge is relative rather than absolute (Clark, 1998; Campbell & Russo, 1999; Welford *et al*., 2011; O'Sullivan & Irby, 2014). This point is articulated by Crossan (2003, p. 52) who states that "reality does not exist within a vacuum, its composition is influenced by its context, and many constructions of reality are therefore possible". In this regard, Popper (1959, 1962), Kuhn (1970) and Bronowski (1950, 1956) emphasised that positivists should dispense with the claim

of absolute truth and instead claim probable or approximate truths (Clark, 1998; Crossan, 2003; Fox, 2008).

Postpositivism emerged as a response to these criticisms (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Fox, 2008; Nawrin & Mongkolsirikiet, 2012). Postpositivism may be understood as an amendment of positivist philosophy (Clark, 1998; Ryan, 2006; Stead, 2004; Nawrin & Mongkolsirikiet, 2012). Ontologically, postpositivism maintains that objective reality exists, but that absolute truth, as proposed by the positivist paradigm, can never be completely known (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2003; Crossan, 2003; Welford *et al*., 2011; Nawrin & Mongkolsirikiet, 2012). Epistemologically, Nawrin and Mongkolsirikiet (2012, p. 16) explain that postpositivism rejects "the idea that any individual can see the world perfectly as it really is". Instead it acknowledges that we can only arrive at an approximation of that reality (Brand, 2009; Nawrin & Mongkolsirikiet, 2012). In contrast to positivism, postpositivism accepts that biases are a characteristic of human inquiry (Guba, 1990; Clark, 1998; Fox, 2008). Postpositivism also contends that reality is indeterminate and contingent, because what might have been taken to be true in the past may no longer be taken to be true today (Clark, 1998; Crossan, 2003; Nawrin & Mongkolsirikiet, 2012). In this regard, postpositivist researchers recognise that theories are contextually dependant and cannot be generalised to all populations or settings (Clark, 1998; Crossan, 2003; Joslin & Müller, 2016).

In describing the nature of postpositivist inquiry, Clark (1998, p. 1245) suggests that "science is still deemed to require precision, logical reasoning, and attention". In contrast to positivist inquiry, evidence in postpositivist inquiry is not confined to that which can be physically observed (Clark, 1998; Crossan, 2003). Postpositivists consider both quantitative and

qualitative methods to be valid research approaches (Creswell, 2003; Nawrin & Mongkolsirikiet, 2012). In this regard, they reject the "strict dichotomy" (Clark, 1998, p. 1245) that is often drawn between qualitative and quantitative methodological principles. Postpositivists believe that knowledge can only be revealed by multiple measures and observations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crossan, 2003; O'Sullivan & Irby, 2014). They commonly use experimental designs, surveys, discourse analysis, and ethnography to collect data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2003; Nawrin & Mongkolsirikiet, 2012).

Critiques of the postpositivist paradigm have emerged from those adopting a purist stance to mixed-methods (Lather, 1992; Phoenix *et al*. 2013). Mixed-methods is a research design that includes both quantitative and qualitative methods (Johnson *et al*., 2007; Wiggins, 2011). Purists contend that mixed methods are not possible because qualitative and quantitative methods are incommensurable in their philosophical and theoretical foundations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 2005; Dootson 1995; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003; Slife & Gantt, 1999; Kettley 2012; Phoenix *et al*. 2013). Quantitative methods are associated with a realist-external ontology and an objectivist epistemology while qualitative methods are associated with a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The purpose of qualitative research is "to describe and understand, rather than to predict and control" (MacDonald, 2012, p. 34). This limitation was crucial in informing the development of paradigmatic frameworks more suited to qualitative work, such as the interpretive-constructivist paradigm (Phoenix *et al*., 2003; Nelson *et al*., 2014). The interpretive-constructivist paradigm also emerged as a critical reaction to positivism (Clarke & Humberstone, 1997; Macdonald, 2002). I discuss this paradigm next.

The interpretive-constructivist paradigm

The interpretive-constructivist paradigm fundamentally rejects the belief that the social world can be understood objectively (Markula & Silk, 2011; Potrac *et al*., 2014; Bryman, 2015). The interpretive-constructivist paradigm sees the social world as interpreted or constructed by people (Williamson *et al*., 2002; Markula & Silk, 2011). In this regard, it is inherently different from the physical world. The interpretive-constructivist paradigm "supports that natural sciences and positivistic assumptions are appropriate for the study of the physical world, but not for the study of the social world because it has very different characteristics" (Avramidis & Smith, 1999, p. 28). Many different terms have been used to describe the interpretive paradigm, including naturalistic (Guba, 1979, 1987), hermeneutic (Packer, 1985), qualitative (Golafshani, 2003), and anti-positivist (Nolan & Behi, 1995). Mertens (1998) and Mack (2010) claim that the interpretive-constructivist term appears to represent it better because its defining feature is that realities are multiple and socially constructed. The interpretive-constructivist term is also used widely in the literature (Avramidis & Smith, 1999; Ardalan, 2003; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Williamson, 2006; Willis, 2007). Thus, it is the term that I adopt in this study.

The interpretive-constructivist paradigm is traditionally rooted in a relativist ontology, a subjectivist epistemology, and a naturalistic methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 2013; Creswell, 2007; Lee, 2012; Potrac *et al*., 2014). A relativist ontology holds that reality is multiple, constructed, and mind-dependent (Blaikie, 1993; Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 1999; Mertens, 1998). As Ellis *et al*. (2006, p. 524) point out, "reality exists as each person perceives it within his or her worldview". Therefore, the interpretive-constructivist paradigm posits that there is no single, objective reality apart from our perceptions (Morrow *et al*., 2001; Lapan *et al*., 2012; Potrac *et al*., 2014). There will also be multiple versions of reality because each

person will perceive it subjectively and differently (Krauss, 2005; Ellis *et al*., 2006; Lapan *et al*., 2012). In a subjectivist epistemology, knowledge and meaning are subjective and socially constructed through interactions between individuals (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell, 2007). Interpretive-constructivist researchers are therefore concerned with understanding how individuals make sense of reality rather than finding an objective, universal truth (Blaikie, 1993; Crotty, 1998; Potrac *et al*., 2014). The interpretive-constructivist paradigm uses a naturalistic methodological approach to attend to the ways in which individuals make sense of reality (Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Markula & Silk, 2011; Potrac *et al*., 2014). In this regard, participant observations, qualitative interviews, document analysis, and focus groups are principal methods of the interpretive-constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2000; Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2006; Markula & Silk, 2011; Mallet & Tinning, 2014).

The interpretive-constructivist paradigm places importance on individual consciousness and subjectivity (Avramidis & Smith, 1999; Ardalan, 2003; Willis; 2007). Samdahl (1999, p. 119) observes therefore that it is "sensitive to individual meanings that can become buried within broader generalisations". The paradigm also emphasises the importance of context in understanding meanings, behaviours, and experiences (Bogdan & Bilken, 2006; Markula & Silk, 2011). Interpretive-constructivist researchers do not control or manipulate the context to make observations (i.e. by imposing predefined variables on the research process) but aim to achieve an in-depth, holistic understanding of multiple individual experiences (Cavaye, 1996; Crotty, 1998; Markula & Silk, 2011). As Krauss (2005) explains, interpretive-constructivist researchers "see all quantification as limited in nature, looking only at one small portion of a reality that cannot be split or unitized without losing the importance of the whole phenomenon" (p. 759).

The interpretive-constructivist paradigm has inherent weaknesses that need to be recognised. Many positivist researchers question the value of interpretive-constructivist research for its lack of objectivity, generalisability, and evidentiary value (Crotty, 1998; Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Wiggins, 2011; Leavy, 2014). As Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) point out, interpretive-constructivist research "is seen as deficient because of the personal interpretations made by the researcher, the ensuing bias created by this, and the difficulty in generalising findings to a large group because of the limited number of participants studied" (p. 12). Interpretive-constructivist researchers contest these views and contend that their research is concerned with providing rich and contextual understanding of social phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Rowlands, 2005; Scotland, 2012). In this regard, interpretive-constructivist researchers generally do not claim to be able to generalise findings to other populations or situations. Instead, they give readers a rich sense of the research situation to provide them with the opportunity to recall and make comparisons with their own experiences (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Marks, 2012). In this sense, generalisability comes from the reader seeing issues from their own perspective.

Interpretive-constructivist researchers also challenge the positivist notion of objective, bias-free research. They suggest that all research, albeit to different degrees, is subjective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 2013; Mack, 2010). Interpretive-constructivist research is necessarily more subjective than positivist research because the researcher is more involved in aspects of the research process (Mack, 2010; Manning & Stage, 2016). This includes things like devising and asking research questions and interpreting data. There is concern, therefore, that factors including the researchers' biographies, values, and beliefs will bias the research process

(Sparkes, 1992; Bracy, 1996; Kim, 2003; Crossan, 2003). In this regard, researchers in the interpretive-constructivist paradigm have a responsibility to be reflexive and transparent about their biographies, values, and beliefs (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998; Roulston, 2010; Bryman, 2015). Hastie and Hay (2012) explain that reflexivity is a "form of critical self-reflection that requires the articulation of researchers' values, beliefs, investments, and life experiences and the potential influence of these on the collection and interpretation of data" (p. 82). Reflexive accounts, therefore, foreworn readers of any biases or assumptions that may influence study outcomes (Creswell, 2007; Bryman, 2015). The interpretive-constructivist paradigm has also been criticised for being too conservative in its views of reality (Fay, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Blaikie, 1993). For example, Fay (1977) contends that the interpretive-constructivist paradigm "does not provide a means whereby one can study the relationships between the structural elements of a social order and the possible forms of behaviour and beliefs which such elements engender" (p. 83-84). In other words, the social forces that influence how individuals make meanings of and experience reality. The interpretive-constructivist paradigm also overlooks the role of power in individuals' meanings, experiences, and actions (Fay, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Blaikie, 1993). The poststructuralist paradigm overcomes these limitations. I explain this next.

The poststructuralist paradigm

The poststructuralist paradigm shares fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality with the interpretive-constructivist paradigm. For example, the poststructuralist paradigm and the interpretive-constructivist paradigm reject the positivist notion of an objective, singular reality and they agree that reality is multiple, fragmented, and situated (Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Markula & Silk, 2011; Avner *et al*., 2014). However, what distinguishes the poststructuralist

paradigm from the interpretive-constructivist paradigm is the belief that reality is produced through discourses (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Markula & Silk, 2011; Avner *et al*., 2014). From a poststructural perspective, discourses are sets of ideas and concepts that shape understandings of the social world (Markula & Silk. 2011; McEvilly, 2012). Avner *et al*. (2014, p. 43) explain that "discourses are produced through dynamic and fluid (albeit non-egalitarian) power relations, which frame our understanding of the social world". In this regard, as Markula and Silk (2011, p. 52) explain, "language and meaning making (knowing) are central aspects of analysis". The most commonly adopted methods adopted in poststructuralist research are qualitative in nature and include interviews, focus groups, observations, and textual analyses (Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Tracy, 2013; Avner *et al*., 2014).

A key strength of the poststructuralist paradigm lies in its recognition of discourses and power relations (Kirk, 1992; Macdonald *et al*., 2002; McEvilly *et al*., 2013). McEvilly *et al*. (2013) suggests that this recognition allows researchers to recognise their constitutive effects (Burrows & Wright, 2004; Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Wright, 2006). For example, the poststructuralist approach provides a means for exploring the discourses that individuals draw on to constitute themselves as subjects and the power relations that work to determine the meanings that predominate in society (Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Wright, 2006; McEvilly *et al*., 2013). In this regard, the poststructuralist approach provides a way of comprehending how the seemingly natural and taken for granted are bound up with broader discourses and systems of power (Rønholt, 2002; MacLure, 2003; McEvilly *et al*., 2013).

There are several critiques of the poststructuralist paradigm. For example, poststructuralism has often been accused of determinism (Fraser, 1989; Alcoff, 1992; Ezzy, 1997; Spratt, 2017).

Critics charge that the poststructuralist conception of power leaves little possibility for individual agency, since individuals are unable to resist its effects and make meanings of their own (Fraser, 1989; Alcoff, 1992; Ezzy, 1997; Spratt, 2017). Agency refers to the capacity of an individual to act on their own behalf, drawing on their own beliefs and desires (Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Danaher *et al*., 2007; Taylor, 2010). Poststructuralists see power as embedded in discourses which frame how individuals make sense of reality (Weedon, 1997; MacNaughton, 2000; Danaher *et al*., 2007). Taylor (2010, p. 167) explains, however, that if "beliefs and desires are the product of the power one also wants to oppose, agency (of this kind) may be impossible". Poststructuralist conceptions of power have been revised in the last few decades (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Thorpe, 2008). For example, Rail and Harvey (1995, p. 167) note that many poststructuralist researchers are now interested in how individuals "think about themselves, act for themselves, and transform themselves within power relations" (p. 167). Poststructuralist researchers acknowledge, therefore, that individuals may disrupt and resist discourses and power relations (Danaher *et al*., 2007; Taylor, 2010; McEvilly *et al*., 2013).

My paradigmatic position

I take a poststructuralist approach in this study. This reflects my personal history and my interest in understanding more about how discourses and power relations impact on setting processes in PE. Sparkes (1992, p. 12) explains that "the values and assumptions individuals adopt regarding the nature of the research enterprise are a product of their life history during which a personal stock of recipe knowledge and system of relevancies is developed via the process of socialisation". Here, I focus on two aspects of my life history that have strongly influenced my thinking about the nature of research: first, my experiences as a secondary school PE teacher; and, second, my experiences as a researcher. I entered the teaching

profession with a sense of purpose. I wanted to have a positive impact on all pupils and was committed to providing a learning environment that would support them in their learning in PE. The difference between this purpose and the reality of my teaching was stark. I found myself implementing teaching practices that I felt uncomfortable with. Nonetheless, I was in my first year of teaching and felt inexperienced and unable to challenge what I believed to be the decisions of the PE Head of Department [PE HoD]. I remember attending a department meeting where a more experienced colleague voiced concerns about what he saw as the privileging of the needs of more able pupils in PE. The PE HoD responded by highlighting the pressure that he felt from the senior leadership team to raise levels of attainment in the school. His comments, and my own experiences of teaching PE, made me think further about the inequalities in power relations in schools.

As a researcher, I have tried to find explanations that account for my lived experiences as a PE teacher. In this regard, I have been drawn to perspectives that acknowledge the role of power in decision making. I looked to the education literature and came across the work of Michel Foucault. I was struck by how his ideas resonated with my experiences as a PE teacher. For example, Foucault's concepts of discourse and power helped me to understand why I felt I had to act and behave in a certain way as a PE teacher. Indeed, as Denison and Scott-Thomas (2011) explain, Foucault's ideas help to "explain what shapes our actions and thoughts, and how the making of choices is permitted within its own rules" (p. 30). Foucault also highlighted the potential for agency in his work by acknowledging that individuals may negotiate and resist discourses (Wright, 2004, 2006; McEvilly, 2012). I will develop this point in more detail in the next section. I found Foucault's ideas difficult to comprehend at first and looked to the education literature to understand the application of his work. I turned to the work of Stephen Ball and started to see further connections to my experiences as a PE teacher. Ball is not a

Foucauldian, but his ideas are heavily influenced by his work. I was especially drawn to Ball's ideas on policy enactment and performativity because they allowed me to understand how aspects of the school context and pressures to raise attainment impacted on my teaching practices in PE. The next section discusses Foucault and Ball's ideas in detail and explains how they were used in this study.

My theoretical framework

Foucault is widely acclaimed as one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century (MacNaughton, 2005; Danaher *et al*., 2007; Duignan, 2010). He was a central figure in the development of postmodern and poststructural ideas (MacNaughton, 2005; Wright, 2006; Dahlberg *et al*., 2007; Avner *et al*., 2014). Foucault's work marked a move away from the main tenets of positivism and interpretive-constructivism, and particularly their articulations of power, knowledge, and truth (Avner *et al*., 2014). Foucault (1998, p. 100) stressed that "it is in discourse that power, knowledge, and truth are joined together". Much of Foucault's work, therefore, focused on the interrelations of power, knowledge, and truth, and their effects on individuals and institutions (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b; MacNaughton, 2005; McEvilly, 2012). As Anderson and Grinberg (1998) explain, Foucault was primarily interested in "the various ways that power operates through social institutions and the elements of social relations that control, govern, and normalise individual and collective behaviour" (p. 332). Foucault's work has been applied in many fields, including PE (Fernández-Balboa & Muros, 2006; McEvilly *et al*., 2013, 2015; Drew & Gore, 2016), education (O'Flynn, 2010; Marks, 2012; Francis *et al*., 2017), nursing (Henderson, 1994; Holmes & Gastaldo, 2002), and psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Burman, 1994), to name just a few. For example, McEvilly *et al*. (2013) used a Foucauldian perspective to examine the discourses that preschool practitioners draw on to

explain PE and Drew and Gore (2016) used Foucault's notion of technologies of the self to understand the ways in which primary school pupils resist the imperatives of health discourses.

Foucault rejected the humanist notion that individuals autonomously make meaning of reality (Foucault, 1972, 1980b; Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Markula & Silk, 2011). Instead, he took the view that individuals' thoughts, actions, behaviours, and so on, are influenced, regulated, and to some extent, circumscribed by discourses (Foucault, 1980b; Bevir, 1999; Danaher *et al*., 2007). The notion of discourse is used in various ways, particularly within linguistic studies and in the use of discourse analysis (Marks, 2012; Ball, 2015). It is important therefore to clarify my own use of the term in this study. I draw on Foucault's understanding of discourse, which, as Olssen *et al*. (2004, p. 68) explain, is "concerned mainly with the social and political analysis of discursive practices as systems of rules, rather than with textual analysis of real instances of what is said or written, that is with the analysis of actual texts". From a Foucauldian perspective, discourses are systems of ideas, concepts, and beliefs, often with institutional bases, which provide a way to make sense of reality (Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Weedon, 1997; MacNaughton, 2000; Danaher *et al*., 2007). Discourses can be both enabling and repressive in their effects (Foucault, 1980b, 1988). They enable people to understand and make sense of reality, but in the process of doing so, as Kirk (1992, p. 48) explains, they "limit access to other possibilities". Discourses are therefore imbued with power and potency in the sense that they channel how people understand and make sense of reality (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b, 1988; Kirk, 1992). Moreover, Foucault (1980b, 19988) explained that particular discourses become normalised and privileged in society (Cohen, 1988; Fairclough 1998; Feder, 2010; Francis *et al*., 2017). Adie (2008) suggests that this depends on "the pervasiveness of the discourse to other discourses; the resonance of the discourse in every aspect of a person's life; and the power of the social agents who undertake dissemination of this discourse" (p. 7-8). In this regard,

discourses are inextricably linked with power (Dennison & Scott-Thomas, 2011; Potrac & Jones, 2011; McEvilly, 2012).

Foucault (1973, 1979, 1980a) was critical of the traditional Marxist view of power, which sees power as hierarchical and something that is held and exerted by a dominant class over a dominated class (Danaher *et al*., 2007; Taylor, 2010; Avner *et al*., 2014). Foucault (1973, 1979, 1980a) argued that the Marxist emphasis on the economic aspects of power oversimplified the complexity of power relations in modern society (Danaher *et al*., 2007; Taylor, 2010). Specifically, Foucault (1973, 1979, 1980a) argued that the Marxist view of power failed to grasp the productive nature of power, the operation of power at the localised level, and the possibilities of resistance to power. Foucault (1973, 1978, 1979, 1980a, 1980b) believed that power does not descend from above, but is diffused within society (Saltmarsh & Youdell, 2004; Paechter, 2006; McEvilly, 2012). According to Foucault (1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1991a), this is because power is inherent in everyday relationships and interactions with others (O'Flynn, 2004; Taylor, 2010; Dennison & Scott-Thomas, 2011). Foucault (1979) asserted therefore that power is "exercised, not possessed'" (p. 26). Long and Hylton (2002, p. 91) explain that "the structures of our society, founded on uneven distribution of access to the networks of power, mean that it is easier for some" groups or individuals "to exercise power than others". Foucault (1991a) also pointed out that the effects of power should not be conceived of in purely negative terms, for example, as oppressing or controlling individuals, but rather as generative and productive (O'Flynn, 2004; Danaher *et al*., 2007; Taylor, 2010). He commented that "power produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault, 1979, p. 194).

Foucault (1972, 1979, 1990) identified modern modes of power, such as disciplinary power (Taylor, 2010; Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012). Disciplinary power is a form of power that aims to regulate the thoughts and conduct of individuals (Foucault, 1990; Gore, 1995; Taylor, 2010). Foucault (1990) used the example of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon to exemplify the workings and effects of disciplinary power. The Panopticon is an architectural prison design that allows guards to observe inmates without them knowing that they are being observed (Foucault, 1990; Gore, 1995; Dennison & Scott-Thomas, 2011; Schrift, 2013). It follows, then, that since inmates assume that they are being observed, they are disciplined to be obedient (Gore, 1995; Taylor, 2010; Dennison & Scott-Thomas, 2011). As Dennison and Scott-Thomas (2011, p. 33) explain, "the omnipresent gaze of authority subsequently disciplines subjects to survey their own behaviour in a manner that renders them docile". The inmates change or adapt their behaviour to conform with the rules of the prison even when the guards are not observing them (Taylor, 2010; Dennison & Scott-Thomas, 2011). In this regard, they are subjected to the control of disciplinary power "without conscious awareness" (Hutchinson *et al*., 2006, p. 121). In the Panopticon, disciplinary power is exercised through the techniques of surveillance and normalising judgement (Foucault, 1972, 1979, 1990).

Foucault (1988, 1989, 1996) also challenged the essentialist conception of identity as unified, fixed, and predetermined. He contended that identities are multiple, always in process, and contextually situated (Foucault, 1972, 1988, 1989). Foucault used the term subjectivity to describe and explain identity (Weedon, 1997; Danaher *et al*., 2007; Taylor, 2010). In his exploration of feminist poststructuralism, Weedon (1997, p. 32) defined subjectivity as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world". Danaher *et al*. (2007, p. 1-2) pointed out that Foucault uses the term subjectivity to "replace the common-sense notion that our identity

is the product of our conscious, self-governing self". Instead, Foucault (1972, 1988, 1989) viewed identity as constructed through discourses and institutional practices (Owen, 1995; Wright, 2004 O'Flynn, 2004, 2010). Foucault (1972, 1988, 1989) proposed that discourses produce subjectivities through their connections to power (Hastings, 1999; Danaher *et al*., 2007; Larsson *et al*., 2009). As Danaher *et al*. (2007, p. xiv) explains, "power produces what we are, what we can do, and how we see ourselves in the world".

Foucault's conceptions of power and subjectivity are criticised by some for being overly deterministic (Fraser, 1989; Sawicki, 1991; Lloyd, 1993; Alcoff, 1992; Hekman, 1996). As Alcoff (1992, p. 73-74) explains, "Foucault's demotion of subjectivity to an analytic position posterior to power results in a conception of subjectivity deprived of agency". Foucault (2000) himself acknowledged this criticism, admitting that his earlier work had perhaps "insisted too much on the technology of domination and power" (p. 225). Foucault's (1991b, 1996, 2000) was clear in his later work, however, that although individuals are the subjects of disciplinary power, they can actively constitute their subjectivities (O'Flynn, 2004; Atencio & Wright, 2009; Wrench & Garrett, 2017). Foucault (1991b, 2000) used the interrelated concepts of governmentality and technologies of the self to specify this constitution.

The notion of governmentality describes the link between the practices of government and the conduct of individuals or groups (Foucault, 1991b; Townley, 1993; Kelly & Colquhoun, 2003; Walters & Haahr, 2005). Foucault (1991b) defined government in a broad sense, beyond simply political institutions (Townley, 1993; Shoshana, 2012; Perryman *et al*., 2017). For Foucault (1991b), government is a "form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons" (Gordon, 1991, p. 2). According to Foucault (1988, p. 19),

such government operates in the "contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self". Technologies of the self are a series of practices or techniques "that allow individuals to engage in processes of self-formation" (O'Flynn, 2004, p. 24). These practices or techniques include self-care, self-governance, and self-knowledge (Foucault, 1996, 1997, 2000; Thorpe, 2008; Wrench & Garrett, 2017). Foucault (2000) suggested that self-knowledge is one of the most important technologies of the self. As Danaher *et al*. (2007, p. 129) explains, "knowing the self involves determining the truth about the self, because only in knowing this truth can we work on ourselves". Foucault (2000) claimed that this leads to greater critical self-awareness, where individuals "question what is natural and inevitable in their subjectivity" (Markula, 2003, p. 102).

I used Foucault's concepts of discourse, power, subjectivity, governmentality, and technologies of the self in this study. In this regard, I did not take a deterministic approach to discourses and their operation in PE. Foucauldian-inspired researchers have often been criticised for treating teachers and pupils as passive recipients of discourse (Fraser, 1989; Alcoff, 1992; Ezzy, 1997; Spratt, 2017). Instead, like others researching in PE (Oliver & Lalik, 2004; Azzarito & Solmon, 2005; Azzarito *et al*., 2006; McEvilly, 2012; Wrench & Garrett, 2017), I conceptualised PE teachers and pupils as "actively involved in constituting their subjectivities" (McEvilly, 2012, p. 217). I drew on Foucault's (1991b; 1996, 2000) ideas on technologies of the self to understand how discourses of ability and setting were negotiated or resisted by PE teachers and pupils (Wright *et al*., 2006; McEvilly, 2012; Wrench & Garrett, 2017). I also used Foucault's ideas on governmentality to explore the ways in which disciplinary mechanisms, such as the Ofsted inspection regime, shaped PE teachers' actions and practices in PE.

Taking inspiration from education policy sociology

This study was also influenced by Stephen Ball's Foucauldian-inspired work on performativity (Ball, 2000, 2003, 2010) and education policy enactment (Ball *et al*., 2011a, 2011b, 2012a). Ball and colleagues' work - and specifically Braun *et al*. (2010, 2011a, 2011b) and Maguire *et al*. (2010, 2013, 2015) - has had a major influence on ideas relating to enactment in educational policy. In this regard, I was drawn to it in relation to understanding the 'policy' of setting in PE. To the best of my knowledge, this work has not been specifically used in the ability grouping literature. It has, however, been much drawn upon to inform other research in the PE (Hay, 2008, 2012; Rich & Evans, 2009; Penney & Hay, 2008; MacLean *et al*., 2015; Alfrey *et al*., 2017; Jess *et al*., 2017; Brown & Penney, 2017; Simmons & MacLean, 2018) and broader education literature (Jeffrey, 2002; Braun *et al*., 2011b; Bradbury, 2012; Tanner & Pérez Prieto, 2014; Singh, 2015; Keddie, 2016; Vincent *et al*., 2016). For example, Jeffrey (2002) drew on Ball's theorising and research to explain how the demands of performativity impacted on teachers' identity in six primary schools and Braun *et al*. (2011b) developed Ball's early ideas to show how contextual factors, such as school intake, ethos, and culture, mediate the enactment of policies in different schools. In this study I used Ball's work on performativity and Ball, Braun, and Maguire's work on education policy enactment to explain the ways in which the policy of setting was interpreted and enacted by PE teachers, and the implications of this enactment for pupils in PE. In keeping with Braun *et al*.'s (2011b) and Maguire *et al*.'s (2013) recommendations, I also explored the 'relationship' of the policy of setting to other competing and overlapping policies, including those relating to standards and attainment, and attended to the role of context in shaping policy enactments within and across schools (Braun *et al*., 2011b; Maguire *et al*, 2013).

Ball (2000, 2003, 2008, 2012) uses the notion of performativity to delineate the relationship between systems of performance management and teacher identity. Ball (2003, p. 216) defines performativity as "a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons, and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition, and change - based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)". Schools and teachers are positioned as responsible for their own performance and the performance of their pupils (Ball, 2008, 2012). In England, for the most part, these 'performances' are measured by Ofsted inspections and examination results (Perryman, 2006; Evans *et al*., 2007; Rich & Evans, 2009). Ball (2016, p. 1053) suggests that these external measures "do not simply report our practice: they inform, construct, and drive our practice. Our sense of what is right is challenged by what is necessary, or more precisely, what is measured". Ball's (2000, 2003, 2016) research has shown that the culture of performativity can have a powerful effect on teachers, often provoking anxiety, increased competition, and an excessive focus on more able pupils. Ball's ideas on performativity were useful in enabling consideration of some of the broader influences, such as accountability pressures, on the ways in which PE teachers interpreted and enacted the policy of setting in PE. I will elaborate on these ideas in detail below.

In much of the education policy literature, policy is treated merely as "a finished object crafted at the higher levels of the bureaucratic structures" (Viczko & Riveros, 2015, p. 480). Ball, Braun, and Maguire are critical of this approach for portraying teachers and other education workers as passive subjects who implement education policy in a linear and straightforward manner in schools (Braun *et al*., 2010; Maguire *et al*., 2013; Viczko & Riveros, 2015; Tan, 2017). According to Ball, Braun, and Maguire, the problem is that if policy is conceived only in terms of its implementation then "all the other moments in the processes of policy and policy enactments that go on in schools become marginalised or go unrecognised" (Maguire *et al*.,

2015, p. 485). Ball, Braun, and Maguire use the concept of enactment to capture the notion that "policies are interpreted and translated by diverse policy actors in the school environment, rather than simply implemented" (Braun *et al*., 2010, p. 549). Ball *et al*. (2011b, p. 619) explain that interpretation is "an initial reading, a making sense" or meaning "of policy". I.e. What do we have to do? Do we have to do anything? Does it fit with what we already do? (Ball *et al*., 2011b; Singh *et al*., 2013, 2014; Maguire *et al*., 2013). By contrast, translation is an "iterative process of making texts and putting those texts into action, literally 'enacting' policy" (Ball *et al*., 2011b, p. 620).

Ball, Braun, and Maguire note that policies are not discrete entities, but rather "over-lap, inter-relate, and contradict" (Braun *et al*., 2011a, p. 581). In this regard, it is important to emphasise that teachers and other education workers are required to interpret, enact, and manage multiple policies, as well as other demands and expectations in schools (Braun *et al*., 2010; Braun *et al*., 2011b; Ball *et al*., 2012a). These policies are likely to be treated differently based on their type (Ball *et al*., 2011b; Maguire *et al*., 2013, 2015; Hardy, 2014, 2015; Vincent *et al*., 2016). Ball *et al*. (2011b) describe policies as 'imperative' or 'exhortative'. According to Ball *et al*. (2011b, p. 612), imperative policies "produce a primarily passive policy subject whose practice is heavily determined by the requirements of performance and delivery". In contrast, exhortative policies "enable an active policy subject who is required to bring judgement and originality to bear upon the policy process" (Ball *et al*., 2011b, p. 615). Setting is an exhortative policy because it is recommended rather than mandatory in schools in England (see Chapter Two). In this regard, as Evans and Davies (2012, p. 627) explain, "the degree of play of freedom for interpretation varies from policy to policy".

Ball, Braun, and Maguire explain that the form and extent of education policy enactment depends on a variety of factors (Maguire *et al*., 2010; Braun *et al*., 2011b; Ball *et al*., 2012a). They emphasise that "policies are intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors, which act as constraints, pressures, and enablers of policy enactments" (Ball *et al*., 2012a, p. 19). Braun *et al*. (2011b) and Ball *et al*. (2012a) group these factors into four overarching categories: situated, material, professional, and external. Situated factors are those that are "historically and locationally" specific to a school, such as history, intake, and reputation (Braun *et al*., 2011b, p. 588). Material factors are the "physical aspects of a school", such as buildings, but also levels of staffing (Braun *et al*., 2011b, p. 592). Professional factors are "the less tangible context variables", such as teachers' biographies, values, beliefs, and experiences (Braun *et al*., 2011b, p. 591). External factors are "pressures and expectations from broader local and national matters", such as Ofsted inspections, national examinations, and league table positions (Braun *et al*., 2011b, p. 588). Braun *et al*. (2011b) and Ball *et al*. (2012) acknowledge that these factors are overlapping and interconnected (Heimans, 2012, 2014; Singh *et al*., 2014). For example, situational factors, such as school intake and reputation, can influence professional factors, such as teachers' values, beliefs, and experiences (Braun *et al*., 2011b; Maguire *et al*., 2010, 2013; Mulcahy, 2015). Ball, Braun, and Maguire's ideas on policy interpretation and enactment were important in conceptualising PE teachers as active agents in the policy process in this study. They also provided a greater understanding of the role of contextual factors, as well as PE teachers' own beliefs and values, in the ways in which the policy of setting was interpreted and enacted in PE.

My theoretical contribution to the literature

This study seeks to extend a line of policy scholarship that has drawn on work in education policy sociology and sociology of education more broadly (Reay, 1998d; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 2001; Tanner & Pérez Prieto, 2014; Singh, 2015; Vincent *et al*., 2016; Francis *et al*., 2017; Taylor *et al*., 2017). The study builds on the existing research on policy enactment (Tanner & Pérez Prieto, 2014; Singh, 2015; Vincent *et al*., 2016) by providing an empirically-based understanding of the interpretation, translation, and enactment of the policy of setting in secondary school PE. The contribution of this study is in exploring the interpretation and enactment of the policy of setting in PE and its impact on pupils and their subjectivities using the ideas of Foucault, Ball, Braun, and Maguire. The study also contributes to research dealing with policy elaboration, where schools "produce their own take on policies, drawing on aspects of their culture or ethos, as well as on the situated necessities" (Braun *et al*., 2010, p. 548).

Overview of the research study

The study used a broad qualitative approach and consisted of a two-phase research design. In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were used to explore how PE teachers interpreted and enacted the policy of setting in PE. In the second phase, semi-structured focus groups were used to examine how the enactment of setting impacted on pupils and their subjectivities in PE. The study was conducted in three mixed-gender, local education authority [LEA] maintained secondary schools in the North East of England. I focussed on these schools because the preliminary study suggested that setting was prevalent in secondary school PE and because PE is a specialist subject taught by specialist teachers in secondary schools (Garrett & Wrench, 2007; Green, 2008; Wilkinson *et al*., 2016). In contrast, PE in primary schools is often taught by non-specialist teachers who are responsible for teaching across all curriculum areas (Garrett & Wrench, 2007; Petrie, 2010). I discuss more specific aspects of the interviews and focus

groups, including why they were used, their design features, and how they were conducted, in the following section.

Issues of power in the data collection process

An important tenet of the poststructuralist paradigm is that power is relational and productive (Foucault, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1991a). This understanding of power has important implications for researchers taking a poststructural perspective (Lupton, 2000; Markula & Silk, 2011; Avner *et al*., 2014). Since the poststructuralist paradigm acknowledges that no aspect of the research process is ever power-neutral, poststructuralist researchers have a responsibility to consider issues of power in their research (Macdonald *et al*., 2002; Wright, 2006; Avner *et al*., 2014). I recognise that I was in a position of power in the study. I set the interview questions, asked follow-up questions, and selected the number of pupils for focus groups. There were several strategies I used to redress the power balance in the data collection process, including sharing personal information with PE teachers and pupils. I will discuss these strategies in detail throughout the next section. I am mindful, however, of oversimplifying the power relations between myself, PE teachers, and pupils in the study. I am not suggesting that they were passive or powerless. PE teachers and pupils regularly demonstrated that they were "active participants" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 71) in the interview situation. They would often take control of the interview or focus groups and discuss issues and topics that were important to them. In this regard, the interviews were "co-constructed by the interviewer and interviewee(s) in that particular moment" (McEvilly, 2012, p. 173).

Selection of school sites

The three sample schools were coeducational, located in one LEA in the North East of England. The community served by the schools was predominantly white, British, and working-class. The three schools were recruited to the study through purposive and criterion sampling (Silverman, 2000; Thomas & Nelson, 2001; Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which settings or participants are selected based on the purpose of the study (Kerlinger, 1986; Silverman, 2000; Neuman; 2006). Criterion sampling is a kind of purposive sampling of participants or cases on pre-specified criteria (Thomas & Nelson, 2001; Patton, 2002). Purposive and criterion sampling were used to ensure that schools were chosen on the basis that they were using setting in PE.

Table 1. Characteristics of the case study schools

School	**Type of school**	**Age range**	**Pupils on roll**	**SES**	**Gender**	**Number of year 9 PE sets**	**Number of PE teachers**
Oakside	Sports college	11-18	1300	Medium SES	Boys & girls	12 (6 boys/ 6 girls)	7 (3 male/ 4 female)
Burnway	Local authority	11-18	850	Medium/ Low SES	Boys & girls	8 (4 boys/ 4 mixed-ability girls	7 (4 male/ 3 female)
Sandwest	Local authority	11-18	450	Medium/ Low SES	Boys & girls	4 (2 boys/ 2 girls)	4 (2 male/ 2 female)

There were several factors that led me to focus on these three schools as sites for data collection. First, the schools were identified as contrasting examples of those reporting setting in the survey study (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2016). The schools contrasted in relation to size, ethos,

specialisation, and level of setting. In this regard, they provided a basis for addressing some of the contextual factors that influenced the ways in which the policy of setting was interpreted and enacted in PE (Braun *et al*., 2011a; Ball *et al*., 2012a; Maguire *et al*., 2015). The decision to select schools that differed in size was based on research evidence of a strong association between school size and setting (Lee & Croll, 1995; Ofsted, 1998; Hallam *et al*., 2003; Hamilton & O'Hara, 2011; Dunne *et al*., 2011). Previous research has shown that setting is an eminently pragmatic response to class size in larger secondary schools and class sizes tend to be too small to use setting in smaller secondary schools in England (Lee & Croll, 1995; Ofsted, 1998; Hallam *et al*., 2003; Hamilton & O'Hara, 2011; Dunne *et al*., 2011). I therefore especially wanted to include a smaller school in the study to perhaps examine some of the more multifaceted and complex motives they had for setting pupils in PE. Second, based on the findings of previous research (Penney & Houlihan, 2003; Wilkinson *et al*., 2016), a specialist sports college was selected for inclusion in the study. This decision reflected the prominence of setting in these schools and my desire to explore if there was a different impact on pupils because of the emphasis on sport in the school. Finally, I included a secondary school using two different grouping systems in PE. The school used setting in boys' PE and mixed-ability grouping in in girls' PE. This school was included in the study to provide a further point of contrast in examining the gendered dimensions of setting and the differential impact of setting and mixed-ability grouping on pupils and their subjectivities in PE. Details of the three schools are presented in Table 1. They are also discussed in more detail below. To preserve anonymity, the schools and participants have been ascribed pseudonyms and school sizes have been rounded to the nearest 50.

The schools that were selected for the study were approximately three miles apart and recruited broadly similar pupil profiles. Oakside had a slightly different socio-demographic profile. The

school had a strong reputation locally for academic attainment and this encouraged more parents from middle SES backgrounds to choose Oakside in preference of Burnway or Sandwest. The number of pupils eligible for FSMs in the schools was above the national average (14.5%). "Very few" pupils were from ethnic minority backgrounds and "even fewer" had ESL. These were the terms used by Ofsted in their inspection reports of the schools. Teaching in PE in the schools broadly followed the requirements of the National Curriculum. Pupils were offered a range of activities, including athletics, dance, gymnastics, HRF, individual games, OAA, swimming, and team games. PE teachers reported that more time was allocated for team games, including football, cricket, netball, hockey, and rugby. These activities took place over a six-week block. This approach was a school-based curriculum planning structure as the National Curriculum does not specify the length of blocks. Pupils were timetabled for two hours of single-sex PE per week in the schools. This is a common arrangement in co-education secondary schools in England (Lines & Stidder, 2003; Green, 2008).

The schools differed quite markedly in their size, reputation, support for PE, and levels of attainment. Burnway was an eight-form entry school with a full roll of more than 850 pupils. Standards were in line (64%) with the national average (66%) in the school. Burnway prioritised pupils' academic success in mathematics, English, and science. PE teachers indicated that PE was not valued academically in the school. This was seen to be because PE had little bearing on the schools' aggregate performance scores. Burnway was rated good in all areas by Ofsted[20]. Setting was the norm in mathematics, English, and science in the school. Other subjects were 'free' to decide on how to group pupils. Burnway used a two-set format in

[20] Ofsted judge schools against the following criteria: effectiveness of leadership and management; quality of teaching, learning and assessment; personal development, behaviour and welfare; and outcomes for pupils.

boys' PE only. Four form groups came to PE together in timetable halves and were separated by gender. The boys were then divided into two sets: top boys and bottom boys. These were the terms that PE teachers and pupils used to describe different sets in PE. They were taught Year 7 PE wholly in mixed-ability groups but were then put into sets from the beginning of Year 8. The girls remained in their mixed-ability form groups for PE. They stayed in these groups in PE throughout their school years.

Oakside was an oversubscribed, twelve-form entry specialist sports college with over 1300 pupils on roll. The school was one of the highest attaining in the region, as indicated by their pupils' performance in GCSE examinations. Oakside exceeded (87%) the national average in terms of the percentage of its pupils achieving five or more A* to C grades in GCSE examinations. The school emphasised pupils' academic and sporting success. Oakside was rated outstanding in all areas by Ofsted. Setting represented the main school-wide strategy directed towards raising pupils' academic and sporting success at Oakside. Setting was standard practice in mathematics and science classes and was also widely used in other subjects, including science, history, geography, and PE. Oakside used a three-set format in PE. Six form groups came to PE together in timetable halves. This meant that each year group was divided into two halves for timetabling purposes. Pupils were then separated by gender and organised into six single-sex sets: top girls, top boys, middle girls, middle boys, bottom girls, and bottom boys for their PE lessons. Pupils were taught PE in sets from the very beginning of Year 7. This was their first year in secondary school.

Sandwest, the smallest school in the study, was a four-form entry with a declining roll of just under 450 pupils. The school was one of the lowest attaining in the region. Sandwest was well

below (42%) the national average in terms of the percentage of its pupils achieving five or more A* to C grades in GCSE examinations. Nonetheless, the school placed much emphasis on pupils' learning, progress, and achievement, particularly in mathematics, English, and science. Sandwest was rated as requires improvement in all areas by Ofsted. It was school policy to assign pupils to sets at Sandwest. Sandwest used a two-set format in PE. The whole of the year group came to PE together and were separated by gender. Pupils were then organised into four single-sex sets: top girls, top boys, bottom girls, and bottom boys. Sandwest only had enough pupils to form four sets in PE. Pupils began Year 7 in mixed-ability groups before being classified into sets a few months later.

Table 2. Details of PE teacher respondents

School	Practitioner (Pseudonym)	Job title	No. of years teaching	No. of years at school	Year 9 PE Set taught
Oakside	Liam	PE HoD	12	12	Set 1 boys
Oakside	Dawn	Assistant PE HoD	14	12	Set 1 girls
Oakside	Charlene	Teacher of girls' PE	23	12	Set 3 girls
Oakside	Andrew	Teacher of boys' PE	15	15	Set 2 boys
Oakside	Paul	Teacher of boys' PE	13	13	Set 3 boys
Oakside	Amy	Teacher of girls' PE	1	1	Set 2 girls
Burnway	Stephen	PE HoD	13	13	Set 1 boys
Burnway	Karen	Assistant PE HoD	22	22	Mixed-ability girls

Burnway	Mark	Teacher of boys' PE	20	15	Set 2 boys
Burnway	Stuart	Teacher of boys' PE	7	7	Set 2 boys
Burnway	Jill	Teacher of girls' PE	2	1	Mixed-ability girls
Burnway	Thomas	Teacher of boys' PE	1	1	Set 1 boys
Sandwest	James	PE HoD	17	10	Set 2 boys
Sandwest	Susan	Assistant PE HoD	16	14	Set 1 girls
Sandwest	Charlotte	Teacher of girls' PE	10	6	Set 2 girls
Sandwest	Matthew	Teacher of boys' PE	7	7	Set 1 boys

The PE departments were well established in the sample schools. Most of the PE teachers had been teaching at their school for seven years or more. Only three PE teachers in the sample group had been teaching at their school for less than seven years. The sizes of the PE departments differed somewhat. Oakside's PE department consisted of seven (three male and four female) full-time PE teachers, Burnway's six (four male and two female) and Sandwest's four (two male and two female). One female PE teacher left Burnway before the start of the research period. Each PE department consisted of one overall PE HoD and an Assistant PE HoD. Table 2 details the PE teacher respondents involved in the study.

Entering the research site

Prior to the start of the study, I visited each of the three schools twice. Access to each school was obtained through email contact with the PE HoD. All three PE HoDs were known to me, having been participants in the survey study (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, I was able to enter each school site with relative ease. During my first visit to each school, I met with all members of the PE department. This was followed by a second visit, a month or so later, to meet prospective pupil participants. The process for selecting participants is described in the next section. I presented myself as a lecturer and former PE teacher who was interested in learning more about setting in PE. There were several purposes for these visits: (1) to explain clearly the study, its purposes, and the requirements of participation, including activities and durations; (2) to develop, albeit tentatively, a proposed timetable for data collection; (3) to invite participants to the study; (4) to distribute consent forms and information sheets; and (5) to provide PE teachers and pupils with an opportunity to ask any questions or raise concerns. Copies of the participant information sheets and consent forms are included in Appendices 2a-3e. In these visits, PE HoDs, PE teachers, and pupils were also given verbal assurances that their participation was on a voluntary basis and could be terminated at any stage of the research. While the participant information sheets equally detailed the aims and methods of the research study, albeit in written form, and using PE HoDs to distribute consent forms to pupils would have expedited the process, I felt that it was important to meet potential participants in advance of their giving consent. This was a strategic decision to begin to develop rapport with the research participants prior to engaging them in interviews and focus groups. It was also an attempt to redress potential power imbalances between the PE teachers and myself. I was unsure how PE teachers would react to me as a lecturer, researcher, and former PE teacher. In this regard, I shared some of my own personal experiences to highlight similarities between the PE teachers and myself. My intention was to make them understand that I was not there to judge them and to make them feel more at ease in my presence. Written consent from PE HoDs

and PE teachers was not obtained during my initial visits. Instead, to allow them time to consider their involvement in the study, I asked them to email me if they wished to participate. This also served as a means of scheduling individual interviews.

Permission to conduct the study was sought from head teachers in participant schools. Participant information sheets and consent forms were emailed directly to head teachers. If they were happy for the research to proceed, they were requested to sign the letter of consent and return this to the researcher by email or in the post. Informed consent was obtained from head teachers in the three sample schools. All PE HoDs and PE teachers in the sample schools consented to participate in the study. Since all pupils were under the age of 18, consent forms were sent to parents or guardians (via their children). The majority (63 out of 70) of parents or guardians gave their written informed consent for their child to participate in the study and pupils' assent was gained directly. Completed parent or guardian consent forms were returned to the PE HoD in each school. Information letters and consent forms can be found in Appendix 2 and 3. The proposed study was approved by the Northumbria University Research Ethics Committee in October 2015, and data collection commenced in February 2016. Data were collected over a period of 18 months through individual interviews with PE HoDs and PE teachers and focus group interviews with pupils. I discuss these in turn later.

Selection of PE teacher and pupil participants

PE HoDs were chosen as respondents because the findings of the survey study suggested that they were responsible for policy in PE in the school. They also taught pupils in sets in PE. I anticipated therefore that they would have extensive knowledge of the policies, processes, and

practices of setting in PE. PE teachers were included as participants in the study because most of the PE HoDs in the survey study reported that they played a key role in decisions around setting in PE. This was particularly the case in James's responses at Sandwest and Stephens's responses at Burnway. PE teachers were also involved in teaching pupils in sets in PE. In this regard, their perspectives would be useful for understanding how the policy of setting was enacted in PE and their role in decision making in PE.

The PE HoDs in each school were asked to identify pupils for the study. This method has been used widely in research in the PE and setting literature (Nevett *et al*., 2001; Hallam *et al*., 2004b; Solomon, 2007; James *et al*., 2009; Oliver *et al*., 2009; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a; Bernstein *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012). Hay and Macdonald (2010a), for example, allowed PE teachers to select pupil participants in three - high, middle, and low – "broad and loosely defined ability categories" (p. 6). These ability categories were already pre-defined in the schools in my sample. The boys at Burnway and the boys and girls at Sandwest were organised into top or bottom sets for PE lessons. In contrast, the boys and girls at Oakside were organised into top, middle, or bottom sets for PE lessons. These were the terms that many of the research participants used to describe members of different PE sets. Occasionally, research participants would also use the terms set 1, set 2, and set 3. I am careful to use ability labels in the study. Where I refer to pupils in the top, middle, or bottom sets and high or low ability pupils I am using the terms that were adopted by PE teachers and pupils. These terms are not presented within quotation marks to enhance readability. These categorisations were used as the basis upon which PE HoDs identified pupil participants.

The PE HoDs were given several instructions on how to identify pupil participants. Firstly, I asked them to select five Year 9 pupils from each PE set in their school. This ensured that pupils across the setting spectrum were represented in the study. It also provided a basis of comparison for the responses given by pupils in different sets in PE. In all three case study schools, sets were taught by different PE teachers. It was highly unlikely therefore that PE HoDs would teach across the range of sets in Year 9 PE. They were encouraged to identify pupils from the top, middle, and bottom sets in discussion with other members of the PE department. I selected pupils in Year 9 for the study because by this time they were in PE sets for at least one year. It was felt that they would have developed their understanding of setting and their sense of being members of a particular set in PE. Boys and girls were allocated to sets during Year 7 at Oakside and Sandwest and boys were allocated to sets in Year 8 at Burnway. Secondly, PE HoDs were asked to select a cross-section of pupils from each set. This instruction was left purposely vague so that numerous interpretations were possible. My aim here was to achieve a varied sample that would reflect, amongst other things, pupils of different attainments, and a broad range of perspectives and experiences of setting. However, this approach to identifying pupils is often criticised for being unreliable, discrepant, and biased (Maker, 1994; Hany, 1997; Hamilton, 2002). Research has long indicated that teachers tend to select 'better' pupils, even when instructed to make their sample representative (Hunter & Johnson, 1971; Martin, 1984; Johnsen *et al*., 1993; Marks, 2012). In this regard, one concern I had with allowing PE HoDs to select pupils was that they might not give a representative sample within and across sets. Lastly, PE HoDs were asked to include in their selection some pupils who had transitioned between sets. This reflected my interest in understanding how any movement between sets impacted on pupils and their subjectivities in PE. Five pupils in the sample reported that they had moved between sets in PE. Three were girls and two were boys. Following identification by their PE HoD, pupils at each school were invited to participate in

the focus group study. 63 pupils participated in this study. Table 3 provides a breakdown of pupils by set and gender for each school. More specific details of the pupils are given in Appendix 4.

Table 3. Breakdown of pupils by set and gender for each school

	Oakside		**Burnway**		**Sandwest**	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Set 1 PE	5	5	5	N/A	4	5
Set 2 PE	5	4	4	N/A	4	4
Set 3 PE	4	5	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mixed-ability PE	0	0	0	9	0	0
Total	14	14	9	9	8	9
Overall total	28		18		17	

Piloting the research tools

The research tools were piloted with PE teachers and pupils in one purposively selected secondary school in the North East of England. The school was chosen because it was typical of those included in the study. Gallacher (2009, p. 74) suggests that "piloting is important for identifying and rectifying problems at the design stage of a study". The interview guide was piloted with one male and one female PE teacher in the school. Their responses indicated that the interview questions were not specific enough to capture their understandings of ability. This was important to understand how conceptions of ability impacted on the ways in which the policy of setting was interpreted and enacted in PE. I added an additional question to the

interview guide to ask PE teachers to define ability in their own terms. Details of the pilot school, teachers, and pupils are presented in Appendix 5.

The focus groups were piloted with two single-sex groups of five Year 9 boys and seven Year 9 girls. The purpose of piloting the focus groups was threefold: first, to ensure that the questions were comprehensible to pupils; second, to obtain a general idea of the length of focus groups; and, third, to determine the size of focus groups in the study (Gill *et al*., 2008; Tracy, 2013; Bryman, 2015). I found the group of seven pupils unwieldly. It was difficult to keep the discussion on topic, ensure that all pupils had enough opportunity to speak, and acquire more in-depth insights from individual pupils. Similar difficulties have been reported elsewhere in the literature (Templeton, 1994; Smithson, 2000; Stewart *et al*., 2007; Alkaabi, 2017). Consequently, I decided to limit focus groups to five or fewer participants in the study. I discuss the focus groups in more detail later in the chapter. The pilot study also revealed that pupils were particularly interested in discussing issues of ability in PE. Modifications were therefore made to the ordering of questions so that questions about ability preceded those relating to setting. Here, the intention was to stimulate pupils' interest, encourage conversation, and make them feel more confident in the interview situation. Some minor refinements were also made to the phrasing of questions to enhance clarity.

Teacher interviews

Interviews are considered one of the most effective ways of gathering in-depth data on people's points of view on topics (Silverman, 2000; Patton, 2002; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). There are different types of interviews, including structured, unstructured, and semi-structured

(Patton, 2002; Roulston *et al*., 2003; Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). Structured interviews are commonly used in quantitative analysis. Structured interviews are based on questions that are asked of all interviewees (Corbetta, 2003; Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). There is no variation in either the questions asked or the order in which they are asked (Patton, 2002; Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). In this regard, as Kajornboon (2005, p. 5) explains, "there is a common format, which makes it easier to analyse, code, and compare data". On the other hand, structured interviews follow a rigid format of pre-set questions and, therefore, may interfere with rapport building (Patton, 2002; Raworth *et al*., 2012; Saywitz & Camparo, 2014). This has been shown to be particularly problematic when interviewing children (Sattler, 1998; Saywitz & Camparo, 2014).

In contrast to structured interviews, unstructured and semi-structured interviews are non-standardised and are commonly used in qualitative analysis (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001; Kajornboon, 2005; Jamshed, 2014). Unstructured and semi-structured interviews differ in approach (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Patton, 2002; Bryman, 2015). Unstructured interviews are typically based on one or more topics of interest rather than pre-set questions (Van Teijlingen & Forrest, 2004; Silverman, 2004; Bryman, 2015). Here, the interview generally proceeds in a conversational style and the interviewee directs the conversation (Fossey *et al*., 2002; Bryman, 2015). One of the strengths of unstructured interviews is that they can provide data on topics that the researcher has little or no knowledge about (Ploeg, 1999; Patton, 2002; Kajornboon, 2005). However, as Gill *et al*. (2008, p. 292) observe, "unstructured interviews can be difficult to manage, and to participate in, as the lack of predetermined interview questions provides little guidance on what to talk about".

Semi-structured interviews are based on an interview guide that provides a loose structure of questions to be covered (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Denscombe, 1998; Pope *et al*., 2002). The interview guide is not prescriptive, but rather provides a general direction for discussion (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Taylor, 2002; Bryman, 2015). According to Ploeg (1999, p. 36), semi-structured interviews "are used when the researcher has an idea of the questions to ask about a topic". The benefits of semi-structured interviews are that they provide scope for researchers to ask follow-up questions to responses that need clarification or elaboration. They also allow the opportunity for unanticipated responses from interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Kajornboon, 2005; Taylor, 2002; Gill *et al*., 2008). Nelson *et al*. (2013) refer to these follow-up questions as clarification and elaboration probes and suggest that they "not only help ensure that clear and comprehensive descriptions are elicited, but also that participants can confirm, correct, or expand upon their responses" (p. 207). On the other hand, because the format of each semi-structured interview will likely vary, they produce data that can be difficult to analyse and compare (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001; Kajornboon, 2005; Bryman, 2015).

The teacher interviews in this study were semi-structured. A semi-structured approach to data collection was used to ensure consistency and coverage of key topics across interviews, while also providing sufficient flexibility to explore areas of interest as they emerged during the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Denscombe, 1998; Kajornboon, 2005; Taylor, 2005). Semi-structured interviews are also used widely in education policy sociology to understand how teachers and other education workers interpret and enact education policies (Braun *et al*., 2011b; Maguire *et al*., 2011, 2013, 2015; Heimans, 2012; Ashwin *et al*., 2016) and how teachers and pupils respond to the demands of performativity (Ball, 1997a; Bradbury, 2012; Keddie, 2016).

The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide containing a series of pre-determined questions and prompts. The interview guide was developed in three ways: first, from themes in the related literature, second, from responses to a preliminary survey study, and, third, from themes arising throughout the study. Initially, themes relating to the research questions were identified from the literature, and questions designed around each of these themes developed. This ensured that interview questions were grounded in empirical evidence and provided an expeditious means of examining how my research findings compared with those in the extant literature. The three PE HoDs were participants in the survey study (Wilkinson *et al*., 2016). I was therefore able to review what each had said in the survey and use this information to frame questions in interviews. For example, a set of questions were developed to capture the issue of mixed-ability grouping at Burnway. These questions enabled a certain degree of individuality to emerge in the interview process (Silverman, 2004; Croston, 2014; Bryman, 2015).

The interview guide was refined progressively during the research period. As soon as possible after each interview had taken place, audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and iteratively analysed for major themes. This meant that "the data collection process was guided by the simultaneous analysis of the data" (Robertson, 2005, p. 31). By analysing data alongside collecting data, I was able to critically assess the appropriateness of my interview questions in terms of answering my research questions. This approach to data analysis was extremely useful as it highlighted several questions that I needed to ask in future interviews. It also meant that "each new interview episode tended to shed light on, and enrich, the other" (Jones *et al*., 2003, p. 216). For example, within-class ability grouping was a topic that was frequently raised

during interviews with PE HoDs and PE teachers. The provisional interview guide was therefore augmented to include a section of questions about within-class ability grouping in PE. A few additional questions on setting throughout the school were also incorporated into subsequent interviews.

The final interview guide consisted of seven categories of mostly open-ended questions. The first section of the interview guide was introductory, aimed primarily at developing rapport with PE HoDs and PE teachers. This approach, as Purdy (2014, p. 164) notes, was "underpinned by the belief that, over the course of an interview, a rapport develops between the participant and researcher, resulting in the participant being less reluctant to answer". The six other sections of the interview guide covered PE HoDs' and PE teachers' attitudes towards setting, rationale for setting, definitions and perceptions of ability, processes for identifying and moving pupils between sets, other forms of ability grouping in PE, and the perceived impact of setting on pupils. For the most part, each interview covered broadly similar questions. However, as I explained earlier, the interview guide differed slightly according to the sample school. The final interview guide can be found in Appendix 6a.

Prior to the interviews, PE HoDs and PE teachers were provided with a brief, standardised explanation of the interview procedure, their right to withdraw from the research, and ethical issues, including confidentiality and anonymity. They were also asked to reconfirm their consent to participate in the study. All PE HoDs and PE teachers were interviewed face-to-face and individually. Interviews were conducted in a school classroom, communal staffroom, or PE office. Interviews were carried out during PE HoDs' and PE teachers' planning and preparation [PPA] time, meaning that the staffroom and PE office were relatively quiet. In most

cases, PE HoDs' and PE teachers' PPA time lasted only one lesson. As such, interviews were constrained by time restrictions. Where PE HoDs and PE teachers had back-to-back free periods and/or break or lunch-time, interviews were generally longer in duration.

PE HoDs and PE teachers were asked questions from the interview guide. Themes were also pursued when PE HoDs and PE teachers themselves spoke about them. Their responses were followed by a series of probing questions. These questions provided scope to explore emerging themes in more detail and ensured that the direction of conversation remained relevant to the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Nelson *et al*., 2013; Seale, 2018). I used three different types of probing questions. First, clarification probes were used to explore any points that were unclear (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2009; Nelson *et al*., 2013). These included questions such as "You mentioned that top set pupils are naturally more able in PE. What do you mean by this?" Second, elaboration probes were used to gain more in-depth responses from PE HoDs and PE teachers (Merriam, 2009; Nelson *et al*., 2013; Seale, 2018). These included questions such as "You said that you have no choice but to set pupils in PE. Why is that?" Finally, detail-oriented probes were used to enhance the insights of the PE HoDs and PE teachers (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Patton, 2002; Nelson *et al*., 2013). These included questions such as "When did it happen?" and "How did it make you feel?" A total of 16 individual interviews were conducted with PE HoDs and PE teachers. These ranged from 42 to 80 minutes, with most lasting approximately 50 minutes.

Pupil focus groups

Focus groups were used as a means of data collection with pupils. This research method was chosen for two key reasons: first, because focus groups are considered more suitable for obtaining data from children than individual face-to-face interviews (Scott, 2000; Eder & Fingerson, 2002); and, second, to redress somewhat the power differential between myself and pupils in the interview situation (Hennessy & Heary, 2005; McEvilly, 2012; Cohen *et al*., 2017). As Reay (2001, p. 155) reminds us, "the unequal relationship between researcher and researched is compounded when the researcher is an adult and the researched a child". Focus groups, however, "replicate a natural and familiar form of communication in which children talk together with peers" (Gibson, 2012, p. 150). This familiar peer environment tends to make children feel safer and more comfortable interacting with an adult researcher (Silverman, 2004; Gibson, 2012; Bryman, 2015). Compared with individual interviews, focus groups also lessen the researchers control over the interaction, allowing pupils to voice their perspectives more freely (Silverman, 2004; Bryman, 2015). They also mitigate some of the pressure on individual pupils to respond to interview questions (Silverman, 2004; Bryman, 2015; Cohen *et al*., 2017). In part, this is because there are more pupils than adults present (Reay, 2001; Silverman, 2004; Redelius & Hay, 2009).

Focus groups are not without limitations. They are often criticised for inducing groupthink, where individual respondents conform to the majority opinion (Janis, 1972; Fullan, 1993; Levine & Moreland, 1995, 2002). This group mentality can prevent different views from being expressed in focus groups (Janis, 1972; Fullan 1993). This was a cause for concern, particularly as I was interested in how the enactment of setting impacted on individual pupils in PE. While a one-to-one interview would have been more beneficial for this task, the method has been shown to be restrictive in educational settings. Pupils are typically very shy in individual interviews and, for that reason, share only limited information with interviewers (Greene &

Hill, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Bryman, 2015). To alleviate the effects of groupthink, I attempted to include pupils of different abilities and attainments within focus groups in the study. It was hoped that this intra-group variability would lead to the expression of different perspectives on setting in PE. I also asked questions to pupils who I felt were simply agreeing with the majority opinion. This approach encouraged pupils to answer first and meant that they could not agree with what had already been said. I did not press pupils if they did not want to answer questions.

The focus groups were based on an interview guide containing a series of pre-determined semi-structured questions. A semi-structured approach was used to pursue related themes as they emerged (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Taylor, 2002; Kajornboon, 2005; Gill *et al*., 2008). The interview guide was formulated in two ways: first, from themes in the literature, and, second from interviews with PE teachers. The focus group guide consisted of eight categories of mostly open-ended questions. The first section of the interview guide was introductory. Introductory or warm up questions are recommended to "get the group to start thinking about the topic at hand" (Rennekamp & Nall, 2006, p. 4). They have also been shown to help build rapport (Taylor, 2005; Tracy, 2013; Bryman, 2015). The seven other sections of the focus group guide covered topics such as pupils' ability beliefs, perceptions of setting, perceptions of other pupils in different sets, allocation and movement between sets, the impact of setting practices on pupils, and perceptions of other forms of ability grouping in PE. More sensitive questions focussing on the impact of setting were deliberately left until near the end of the focus group guide. It was hoped that by this point in the focus group, pupils would feel more relaxed and comfortable discussing this topic. The final focus group guide can be found in Appendix 6b.

Focus groups were organised by the PE HoDs in the three schools. The PE HoDs arranged a suitable time and location for the focus group to be conducted. They also escorted pupils to and from the focus group location. On arrival, pupil participants were again briefed on the nature and purpose of the research study and verbal assent was sought before proceeding with data collection. I was aware that certain questions might be sensitive in nature. Accordingly, I made it clear to pupils that they did not have to answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. There is evidence that pupils' responses can be biased by the presence of their teacher in interview situations (Scott, 2000; Battistich, 2003; Yigzaw, 2013). To overcome this bias, focus groups took place in a quiet classroom, away from PE teachers. Pupils were withdrawn from PE lessons, with the permission of PE HoDs and their parents, and interviewed in groups of four or five. Seven pupils failed to return a signed parent consent form permitting their participation in the study. In this regard, some focus groups contained four rather than five pupils.

The literature is inconclusive on the size of focus groups. Nonetheless, the weight of evidence suggests that the optimum number of participants should be between six and twelve (Edmunds, 1999; Hatch, 2002; Finch & Lewis, 2003; Stewart *et al*., 2007; Ary *et al*., 2009). There are variations in the literature relating to different research participants. For example, several researchers (Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Gibson, 2007, 2012; Krueger & Casey, 2014; Alkaabi, 2017) have recommend using small-sized focus groups with children because they provide them with more time and opportunity to share their opinions and insights. My personal experience was that pupils were more willing to actively participate in smaller focus groups. Focus groups were made up of pupils from pre-existing single-sex PE sets. In this regard, focus

groups were ‘natural’ (Millward, 1995; Ezzy, 2001; Leask *et al*., 2001). The focus groups mirrored, albeit on a smaller scale, the kinds of social relations that existed between pupils within their PE lessons. According to Leask *et al*. (2001, p. 152), natural focus groups “might be preferred when exploring sensitive topics where a group, who are brought together on the basis of factors considered to be socially divergent, might be reluctant to talk with strangers”. Research also suggests that conducting focus groups in familiar peer groups can help put pupils at ease and encourage them to talk more freely and openly (Bender & Ewbank, 1994; Renold, 2001; Patton, 2002; Hallam *et al*., 2002, 2004b; Basit, 2013). Therefore, I felt that pupils would feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics, including their views of pupils in other sets in PE, in their pre-existing single-sex PE sets, rather than newly formed mixed-sex/mixed-ability groups.

Focus groups can “lead to non-participation by some members and dominance by others” (Cohen *et al*., 2017, p. 533). Despite my best efforts to involve all pupils in the focus groups, including using follow-up questions to responses, some pupils inevitably dominated the discussion. Nonetheless, most pupils actively participated in the focus groups. Assent was obtained in written and verbal form from all pupil participants. In total, 14 focus groups were conducted, involving 63 pupils (33 female and 30 male). The focus groups lasted between 42 and 56 minutes, with the average time being 49 minutes.

Timeline of data collection procedures

Discussion of the data collection process has been divided into two parts (teacher interviews and pupil focus groups) to enhance readability. It is important to note, however, that data

collection was not a linear or straightforward process. For the most part, interviews were conducted with PE teachers first, making it possible to use their data to then structure the pupil focus group guide. However, arranging sequential data collection proved problematic in some instances, with difficulties particularly in securing interview times with PE teachers who had other administrative duties during their PPA time. To expedite data collection, some teacher interviews and pupils focus groups were conducted on the same day. Data collection was already underway when this modification was implemented, with the teacher interviews and pupil focus group elements of data collection ultimately overlapping by three months. The teacher interviews were completed between February and November 2016 and the pupil focus groups between September 2016 and August 2017. The focus groups also took longer than expected to complete because I had to rely on pupils to return signed consent forms. There were several times when I was unable to conduct focus groups because only a few pupils had returned signed consent forms. These focus groups were rescheduled for a later date.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is often viewed as a clean, single, and isolated event that is procedural and unproblematic in nature (Markula & Silk, 2011; Nelson *et al*., 2014). In practice, qualitative data analysis is much more complex and messier than is often explicated by researchers (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Markula & Silk, 2011; Nelson *et al*., 2014). In the context of this research, data analysis was not a single and isolated event, but a reflexive, ongoing, iterative process comprising cycles of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Sparkes, 2002; Markula & Silk, 2011; Tracy, 2013). As I was collecting and analysing the data for this study, I was constantly thinking about how I might make sense of it. Tracy (2013, p. 184) describes this approach as "alternating between emic, or emergent, readings of the data

and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories". An iterative approach, therefore, does not solely ground meaning in the emergent data, but also in the reflection upon current literature, theoretical concepts, analytic priorities, and the specifics of the research questions (Boyatzis 1998; Patton, 2002; Tracy, 2013). In an iterative approach, the data is not analysed in an epistemological vacuum (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Ellis *et al*., 2015). Instead, although meaning emerges from the data, it is also "informed by our reading of the relevant literature and our previous experiences with the data" (Ellis *et al*., 2015, p. 274). In this regard, my data analysis is best described as iterative (alternating emic/etic), rather than purely inductive (Tracy, 2013; Nelson *et al*., 2014). An iterative thematic analysis was used because of its potential to reveal themes that were linked to both the voices of the research participants and the research questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gale *et al*., 2013). Thematic analysis is also one of the most common approaches to qualitative data analysis in the PE and education literature (Green *et al*., 2009; Smith *et al*., 2009; Darragh, 2013; Philpot & Smith, 2018). I used the same data analysis processes for both interviews and focus groups (see Appendix 7).

Data analysis was a threefold process. First, all interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then grouped in three ways for analysis: first, by school; second, by set placement; and, third, by gender. Tracy (2013) refers to this as organising data by source. I organised the transcripts in this way to manage the large volume of data and to facilitate the process of identifying similarities and differences among responses (Denscombe, 1998; Arksey & Knight, 1999; Tracy, 2013). Second, I read the entire corpus of data several times. The intention here was to familiarise myself with the content of the data I was working with prior to in-depth analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2015). Third, an iterative thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes across the data set (Emerson *et al*., 1995; Braun

& Clarke, 2006). The iterative thematic analysis comprised four phases. In the first phase, an emic or emergent analysis was conducted to identify analytic themes and patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Text segments that appeared to carry similar meaning were assigned a provisional category label (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008; Marks, 2014).

In the second phase, the data were further interrogated to assess the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the emergent category labels. Throughout this phase of the analysis, I employed the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). The constant comparative method is circular, iterative, and reflexive, and involves repeatedly reading the transcripts to amend, revise, and collapse the category labels (Merriam, 2009; Roulston, 2010; Tracy, 2013). As this process developed, category labels were reviewed and reworked as new themes emerged (Ball, 1997a; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes comprising similar category labels were often merged to form an overarching category label. In contrast, themes that were considered unsuitable for the identified category labels were given a new category label (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008; Merriam, 2009). To compare data, the category labels were cross-checked by repeating the analysis for each sample group, including, for example, top set boys, and bottom set boys.

In the third phase, I conducted an etic analysis of the data. Within this phase, I critically examined the emergent category labels and coded them to one of the three research questions. In doing so, I was able to identify meaningful data that related to the purpose of the study and syphon off data that did not (Tracy, 2013; Bryman, 2015). Here, I also continually moved back and forth between the emergent data, the extant literature, and the theoretical framework to get better sensitised to issues that I was not able to appreciate in the data (Merriam, 2009; Tracy,

2013; Charmaz, 2014). This approach helped me identify where additional data was needed to flesh out an emerging theory. I used analytic memos to track patterns, reflect on theoretical concepts, and formulate preliminary conclusions (Merriam, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2013; Tracy, 2013). Analytic memos are "sites of conversation with ourselves about our data" (Clarke, 2005, p. 202). Analytic memos were noted in the margins of the transcripts. These phases did not neatly follow on from one another. For example, I did not necessarily complete my data collection, then move on to generating themes, before finally writing up the data. Instead, in keeping with the iterative approach, I alternated between the phases. I often analysed and interpreted data, before returning to collecting more data. In this regard, although I present the four phases of data analysis sequentially and individually, they were not necessarily used in this manner.

One of the issues to emerge from the data was the pressure PE teachers felt from Ofsted and the LEA to adopt setting in PE. Having identified this theme, I went to the literature to see how I could use my theoretical framework to explain it. At this stage of the research, I was relying on Foucault's interrelated notions of discourse, power, and subjectivities to explain the data. I found that these notions could not provide a sufficient understanding of the impact of Ofsted and the LEA on PE teachers and their interpretation of the policy of setting in PE. I searched the literature for theoretical resources that would allow me to explain this and was drawn to Foucault's (1991b) ideas on governmentality. I found these ideas useful in conceptualising the scope of PE teachers' agency in their decision making about the policy of setting in PE. With these ideas in mind, I went back to the field to gather more data on this issue.

The process of analysis continued until the data were exhausted and no further themes emerged (Tracy, 2013; Dyment & O'Connell, 2014). This is often called data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Silverman, 2000; Tracy, 2013). Text segments that exemplified the overarching category labels were then extracted from the transcripts and placed into separate Microsoft Word documents. These text segments had already been colour-coded by theme. This process enabled me to easily retrieve excerpts that best illustrated each theme. The excerpts were edited to provide anonymity to the individuals and schools involved in the study. In addition, once I had placed excerpts into Microsoft Word documents, I had to decide which would be used as a basis for the discussion of data. Selecting excerpts was not merely a matter of picking those that I found most interesting and revealing. Instead, as Emmerson *et al*. (2007) explains, each excerpt must be selected with "a specific purpose in mind" (p. 207). This ranged from illustrating recurring and predominant patterns of behaviour to demonstrating discrepant evidence (Emmerson *et al*., 1995. 2007; Tracy, 2013).

Judging the quality of research

There are various positions on how to judge the quality of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sparkes, 1998, 2002; Richardson, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2013). The most commonly used position in the education literature is the parallel position (Sparkes, 1992; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). The parallel position is founded on the notion that qualitative and quantitative research have different intents and purposes and thus should not be judged by overarching standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln, 1995; Sparkes, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002). Qualitative research aims to provide a rich, in-depth understanding of social phenomena and acknowledges that the researcher and researched co-create understanding through dialogue and interaction (Lincoln, 1992; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Denzin

& Lincoln, 2005; Lee, 2012). Therefore, it would be inappropriate to judge qualitative research by the quantitative standards of empirical generalisability and objectivity (Lincoln, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; 2013). Smith *et al*. (2014) observe that were we to do so, qualitative research would be described as "seriously flawed or as not constituting proper research at all" (p. 199). The parallel position recognises this fact and proposes separate but parallel sets of standards to judge qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Smith *et al*., 2014).

An example of a parallel position can be found in the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who substituted the traditional positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity for the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Smith, 1989, 1990, 1993; Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Smith *et al*., 2015). Lincoln and Guba (1985) viewed these criteria as addressing the trustworthiness of a qualitative research study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Smith & Deemer, 2000; Patton, 2002; Smith *et al*., 2014). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified a series of empirical techniques to achieve each criterion. These included prolonged engagement and persistent observation, negative case analysis, peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checking to establish credibility, thick description to facilitate transferability, and auditing to establish dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

While Lincoln and Guba's (1985) parallel approach is widely used in the education literature, it has been subjected to sustained critique. Sparkes (1998, 2002), Sparkes and Smith (2009), and Smith *et al*. (2014) argue that Lincoln and Guba's (1985) ideas on trustworthiness promote both ontological relativism and epistemological foundationalism. This means that Lincoln and

Guba (1985) subscribe to a view of multiple, constructed, and mind-dependent realities and a view in which reality can be found objectively (Blaikie, 1993; Sparkes, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Smith *et al*., 2014). These views are fundamentally incompatible. Sparkes and Smith (2009, p. 493) posit that "either there must be an acceptance that in a relativistic world of multiple realities there is no way to distinguish trustworthy and untrustworthy interpretations, or the existence of a reality outside of ourselves that can be known objectively using procedures or techniques must be confirmed".

Sparkes and Smith also contest Lincoln and Guba's (1985) claim that member checking "is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility (p. 314). Member checking is defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 108-109) as "referring data and interpretations back to data sources for correction/verification/challenge". Sparkes and Smith (2009) argue that member checking does not "correspond to the logic of qualitative research" (p. 493). They contend that member checking, as a method of verification, "is questionable, since it suggests that in a world of multiple realities (i.e. the researchers and the participants) and ways of knowing, those being studied are the real knowers and, therefore, the possessors of truth" (Smith *et al*., 2014, p. 193) Sparkes and Smith also point to the possibility that researchers and participants may disagree on interpretations. Participant feedback, then, as Smith *et al*. (2014, p. 193) explain, "cannot be taken as direct validation or refutation of the researcher's inferences".

In light of these criticisms, alternative positions and strategies have been proposed for judging qualitative research (Sparkes, 1998, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2013). One of these is described by Sparkes (1998, 2002) and Sparkes and Smith (2009, 2013) as the letting go position. In this position, Smith *et al*. (2014, p. 194) explain that the "researcher

lets go of traditional views of validity that privilege techniques as the only way to guarantee trustworthiness and calls upon other more relevant and appropriate criteria to judge the goodness of a qualitative study". The letting go position is situated within a relativist perspective (Seale, 1999; Smith & Deemer, 2000; Sparkes & Douglas, 2007; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2013). The relativist perspective emphasises the evolving, subjective, and contextual nature of judgements about qualitative research (Sparkes, 1998, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2013). Sparkes and Smith (2013, p. 195) note that the relativist perspective "stands in opposition to the criteriological approach contained within the parallel perspective and is wary of any attempt to determine specific universal judgement criteria in advance of any particular inquiry. This is because a characteristic of research we thought important at one time and in one place may take on diminished importance at another time and place". Therefore, it would be inappropriate to use preselected criteria to judge qualitative research (Sparkes, 2002; Smith & Sparkes, 2009, 2013). As Garratt and Hodkinson (1998, p. 525) remind us, "all criteria for judging research quality contain within them a defining view of what research is". In this view, "any attempt to preselect the criteria against which a piece of research is to be judged is also predetermining what the nature of that piece of research should be". The relativist perspective argues instead that time- and place-contingent lists of criteria should be used to make judgements about qualitative research (Sparkes, 1998, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2013).

In taking a poststructural position, I found myself agreeing with the propositions of the letting go perspective (Sparkes, 1998, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Like Sparkes and Smith (2009, p. 494), I do "not see the term criteria as meaning an absolute or preordained standard against which to make judgment". This position is laden with foundational implications (Sparkes, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2013; Smith *et al*., 2014). Rather, I view lists of criteria as open-ended and dependant on the context and purposes of any piece of research (Smith, 1993;

Sparkes & Douglas, 2007; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2013). In keeping with the letting go perspective and my research approach, I turned to lists of criteria for judging qualitative research. There are various lists of criteria for judging qualitative research (Richardson, 2000; Smith & Hodkinson, 2005; Holman Jones 2005; Tracy, 2010; Markula & Silk, 2011; Smith *et al*., 2014). Some of these lists refer to qualitative research in a broad sense and others to certain traditions, such as autoethnography. I found Tracy's (2010) list particularly useful since she provides various means, methods, and practices for judging quality in qualitative research. Tracy (2010, p. 837) identifies eight 'big-tent' criteria to help judge 'excellent qualitative research'. Tracy (2010) suggests that qualitative researchers should consider all eight criteria in their research. However, like Sparkes and Douglas (2007) and Sparkes and Smith (2009, 2013), I take the position that lists of criteria should not be standardised for use in all research. Qualitative research is multifaceted in that it includes a wide range of purposes, philosophies, methodological approaches, methods, and so on. Sparkes and Smith (2009, p. 496) emphasise, therefore, that qualitative researchers, "on different occasions, might choose to have different criteria in their list".

Given the aims and the approach taken in this study, I deemed the most appropriate criteria for judging the quality of this research to be the contribution it makes to the field, its sincerity, rigor, resonance, and meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010; Markula & Silk, 2011). I therefore invite readers to judge my work in relation to the following criteria. 1. Setting is an important topic because it has the potential to influence the quality of instruction and pupils' outcomes in PE. Previous research has demonstrated that setting can work against the achievement of some groups of pupils in mathematics, English, and science because it encourages some teachers to overlook differences in their ability, learning style, and preferred ways of working (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Hallam *et al*., 2004b; Marks, 2012, 2013). Nonetheless, little

is known about the impact of setting on teaching and learning in PE. 2. In Chapters One and Four I have highlighted how my values, beliefs, and experiences may have influenced the collection and interpretation of data and in Chapters Four and Eight I have been transparent about the challenges faced in conducting this research. 3. The research uses sufficient and appropriate data sources, samples, and data collection procedures. I included a range of schools, PE teachers, and pupils in the study to understand more about the role of context in how PE teachers interpreted and enacted the policy of setting and how this impacted on pupils across the setting spectrum in PE. 4. The research provides insight and understanding of the everyday experiences of PE teachers and pupils in relation to setting in PE. (5) In Chapter Four I explained how my paradigmatic position and theoretical framework influenced the methods used to collect and analyse data. 5. The research interconnects literature with research foci, findings, and interpretations. The research questions were developed from gaps in the literature and research findings are discussed in terms of their contribution to the literature and their implications for policy and practice.

Chapter Five discusses how the policy of setting is interpreted in PE and presents findings from semi-structured interviews with sixteen PE teachers in three case study schools. The evidence presented suggests that the interpretation of policy is a complex process that is affected by a number of internal and external factors, including the status and experience of PE teachers, the reputation of the school, and pressures to deliver better performance outcomes in PE.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE INTERPRETATION OF SETTING IN KEY STAGE 3 AND KEY STAGE 4 PE: TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine the ways in which PE teachers interpret the policy of setting in secondary school PE. It focuses on data collected from interviews with sixteen PE teachers in three case study schools. In the data presented, PE teachers consider the role of their values and beliefs, as well as contextual factors, such as school reputation and ethos, in "forming, framing, and limiting" (Braun *et al*., 2011a, p. 581) the ways in which they interpreted the policy of setting in PE. This analysis provides the foundation for understanding the ways in which PE teachers enact the policy of setting in PE, which is discussed in the next chapter.

The chapter is organised into three main sections. The first section focusses on the ways in which PE teachers interpreted the policy of setting in relation to discourses of ability in PE. The data revealed that most PE teachers spoke about ability in similar ways in the three case study schools. Their beliefs about ability are therefore discussed together to avoid repetition. The second section addresses how PE teachers understood the policy of setting in PE. I discuss each school separately to highlight the impact of contextual factors on the ways in which PE teachers made sense of the policy of setting in PE. The third section provides a summary of the key findings and leads into Chapter Six, which discusses the enactment of setting policy in PE.

PE teachers at Burnway, Oakside, and Sandwest conceptualised ability as a natural, measurable, differential, and relatively fixed capacity. There was a general agreement that pupils were born with ability and that it was possible to improve the ability level they had. PE teachers were keen to emphasise, however, that pupils could only make small improvements to their ability level, especially in PE. This seemed to reflect the limited amount of contact time PE teachers had with pupils. PE teachers were also conceptualising ability as having multiple components and as contextually specific. This was evident in the notion that pupils had natural abilities that were more applicable to some activities of the PE curriculum than others. The following excerpts from the data show how PE teachers were defining ability in PE:

> "I believe that people are born with some natural ability. So, some pupils just grasp things much quicker than others. I think they can all improve and develop though. I'd be in the wrong profession if I didn't think that. There's scope for everyone to improve in PE. It's only to a point though. We only have two hours a week with them. We're not going to be able to make much of a difference to their abilities in that time". (Stuart, Burnway)

> "I think ability is something you are born with. It's apparent when you watch pupils in PE. They have something about them. It's a difficult one though. It's unusual to find someone who is good at everything in PE. You might find that you get to an activity and someone really surprises you". (Matthew, Sandwest)

PE teachers at Burnway, Oakside, and Sandwest also emphasised the importance of pupils trying their best in PE. They held a strong belief that it was not enough to merely have innate ability, but rather that innate ability needed to be realised through sustained effort and practice. This finding is consistent with other studies in PE (Hay, 2005, 2008; Redelius & Hay, 2009; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b; Croston, 2014) and education (O'Flynn, 2004; Solomon, 2007; Marks, 2012). Two PE teachers explained their views as follows:

> "They [pupils] need to be able to show what they can do in PE. If they have natural ability, then they need to be motivated to try, otherwise they are not going to make good on that ability. They have to be willing to put in a level of effort". (Matthew, Sandwest)

> "It's about effort as well. They [pupils] could lose ability by not pushing themselves enough and by being lazy. They can also get better if they work hard and try". (Dawn Oakside)

Andrew, Charlene, Liam, Stephen, and Susan challenged the notion that pupils could only make small improvements to their ability in PE. They believed that ability was transient and subject to change over time. Similar views have been reported in other studies in the PE literature (Evans & Penney, 2008; Hay, 2008; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b). Andrew, Charlene, Liam, Stephen, and Susan drew on developmental discourses to explain that pupils developed at different rates in PE. They also noted that pupils revealed abilities at different stages of their physical development in PE. Charlene's comments were typical of those made by Andrew, Liam, Stephen, and Susan. She remarked:

> "I don't think there's a limit for anyone. I think that you can always develop and change ability. A lot of it comes with physical development. We see a bit of change in the students who have a growth spurt. They mature in terms of their physical ability. Their strength, balance and coordination come on leaps and bounds. They will be able to throw further, run faster and jump higher". (Charlene, Oakside)

At Burnway, Oakside, and Sandwest, there was a general recognition that pupils should be separated into sets in PE. The notion of ability was crucial to this recognition. As Stuart and James explained:

> "The differences in ability levels are huge in PE. So, it's common-sense to set pupils. It reduces the range of ability and makes things a bit easier". (Stuart, Burnway)

> "Students have different abilities. So, it's important to split them. You need to have your more able students working together and your less able students working together. You can also use a range of tests to give you an accurate measure of their ability. So, it gives you a little bit more confidence in splitting them up". (James, Sandwest)

Andrew, Charlene, Liam, and Stephen were also supportive of the policy of setting but stressed that pupils should be able to move frequently between sets in PE. Most of the PE teachers at Burnway, Oakside, and Sandwest suggested that occasional movement between sets in PE was acceptable. The contrasting views of ability and setting are evident in the following comments:

> "I like setting, but it needs to be done in the right way. I get that pupils have different abilities and need to be set in PE. But you've got to move them between sets. It can't be once a year either. I know there are practical difficulties, but we should be changing them around every six weeks. They change activities and you get some that come into their own. They could improve in that time as well". (Andrew, Oakside)

> "Setting makes things a lot easier for us. The ability differences are massive in PE. Setting means you have a smaller ability range in each lesson. It's important that they can move between sets as well. It's more for changes in behaviour and attitude than ability though. I don't think they really change that much. If they do it is maybe only a little bit. We don't move them very often for ability reasons". (Matthew, Sandwest)

PE teachers at Burnway, Oakside, and Sandwest drew on dominant discourses of ability to make sense of the policy of setting in PE. These discourses suggest that pupils have markedly different levels of ability and that ability can be objectively measured through various tests

(Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Evans, 2004; Francis *et al*., 2017). From a Foucauldian perspective, these discourses were productive (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b, 1998). They provided PE teachers with "sets of truths" (Atencio & Wright, 2009, p. 33) about how they should interpret and act on the policy of setting in PE. In taking up dominant discourses of ability, most PE teachers highlighted the importance of setting pupils in PE. They accepted setting as a common-sense response to reducing the spread of ability encompassed in teaching groups in PE. Karen and Jill at Burnway and Susan at Sandwest were exceptions to this rule. I discuss Karen and Jill's views in the next section and Susan's views later in this chapter.

Burnway

Mark, Stephen, and Stuart drew on aspects of their personal and professional histories to make sense of the policy of setting in PE. In the case of Mark and Stuart, their personal histories as pupils in PE contributed to their support for setting. Notably, Mark and Stuart were in the top set in PE as pupils. As such, they were speaking as individuals who had benefited from setting policy in PE. Mark and Stuart recalled:

> "When I was in school, I was taught PE in sets. I really enjoyed it. I learned more when I was in lessons with people who were at a similar ability level to me". (Mark, Burnway)

> "I think setting is a good thing in PE. When I was at school I was set in PE and I loved it. It was fantastic. I was in the top set and everyone wanted to be there. We just got on and there were no behaviour issues. I remember all my friends in my set and a lot of us came out with A*'s, A's or B's. I think that was down to the fact that we were all high ability and we could push each other on in PE. I feel like I benefitted from setting. That's why I think it's important we use setting in PE". (Stuart, Burnway)

Mark also referred to his initial teacher training and the school ethos to make sense of the policy of setting in PE. He noted that he found it difficult to teach pupils in mixed-ability groups in his teacher training year. Mark had a positive attitude towards setting because he felt that it was easier to teach pupils in sets and that the policy was consonant with the ethos of the school. He explained:

> "I'm not a fan of mixed-ability grouping. I really struggled with it in my training year. The teachers I taught with didn't like it either. It was a constant battle, but we were told we had to use it. I think that put me off it a bit. I'm pleased we set here. The ethos is about giving students choice and we make sure we do this with setting". (Mark, Burnway)

Stephen was making sense of the policy of setting in relation to his educational beliefs and values. He explained that he was committed to providing pupils with opportunities to feel a sense of empowerment in PE. Stephen believed that setting was consistent with this commitment because it gave pupils ownership and responsibility. In this regard, like Stuart and Mark, Stephen had a positive attitude towards the policy in PE. This is reflected in the following comment:

> "I think setting is a good thing in PE. We probably do things a bit differently here. We allow the students to choose the set they want to be in for PE. I think it's important that we give students the opportunity to feel like their opinion matters in PE. I'm really committed to this. It's what I believe in. Setting allows them to feel like they have a say in PE. They are responsible for their decision". (Stephen, Burnway)

Mark, Stephen, and Stuart's comments support the argument that teachers interpret policy in relation to their personal and professional orientations (Braun *et al*., 2011a; Ball *et al*., 2012a; Maguire *et al*., 2015). As Ball *et al*. (2011c, p. 8) explain, "teachers bring with them an accumulation of personal experience, which is brought to bear within the policy process".

Mark, Stephen, and Stuart all held positive attitudes towards the policy of setting in PE. However, different aspects of their personal and professional histories influenced the ways in which they came to make sense of the policy in PE. These included their experiences of setting as pupils in PE and influences from their initial teacher training.

In contrast to Mark, Stuart, and Stephen, Thomas explained that his position as a newly-appointed teacher in the school meant that he looked to other PE teachers in the department for guidance and direction on policy matters. He particularly spoke about the importance of informal conversations in helping him make sense of the policy of setting in PE. Other studies of policy interpretation in schools have similarly highlighted the importance of collaborative approaches for newly-appointed teachers (Maguire *et al*., 2015; MacLean *et al*., 2015; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Simmons & MacLean, 2018). Thomas noted that he was not set in PE as a pupil. He also explained that he had not taught pupils in sets in PE during his teacher training. Thomas therefore felt that he was unable to take an active role in interpreting the policy of setting in PE. Instead, he reported that his immediate concern was to do what was expected of him in PE. He recounted:

> "I completed my NQT year last year and I'm just starting to find my feet. I'm still learning. Setting is something that's new to me in PE. I wasn't in sets in PE when I was at school and I didn't have any experience of teaching sets in PE during my teacher training. I didn't really know what to think of it in PE. So, it's important that I can speak to other teachers in the department about setting. I find informal conversations in the sports hall or the corridor useful. That way I don't have to speak up in department meetings and sound like I don't know what I'm doing. It was just a case of asking other teachers why we used setting in PE and what was expected of me". (Thomas, Burnway)

Thomas's comments highlight how his positionality as a newly-appointed teacher impacted on the way in which he interpreted policy in PE. Thomas depended on more experienced members of the PE department to assist him in making sense of the policy of setting in PE. In this regard, he "exhibited a form of policy dependency" (Maguire *et al*. 2015, p. 494).

Karen and Jill engaged more critically with the policy of setting in PE. They drew on gendered discourses around ability to argue that girls and boys should be grouped differently in PE. Karen and Jill positioned girls and boys as essentially different in their attitudes, behaviours, needs, interests, abilities, and so on. Other studies have similarly reported that PE teachers tend to treat girls and boys as discrete and homogeneous groups in PE (Wright, 1996; Hay & lisahunter, 2006; Hills, 2006; Hay & Macdonald, 2010b; Croston, 2014). For example, Karen and Jill perceived girls as more cooperative and boys as more competitive in PE. They believed that these characteristics lent themselves to different forms of grouping in PE. Karen and Jill explained that mixed-ability grouping was more appropriate for girls because it provided them with opportunities to support each other in their learning in PE. In contrast, they emphasised that boys were in sets because they were competitive in PE. Karen and Jill's assumptions about gender and ability were crucial to the ways in which they interpreted the policy of setting in PE. Karen commented:

> "I know the lads set but we don't with the girls. What works for the boys doesn't necessarily work for the girls. The lads are very competitive in PE. They play a lot of competitive sport outside of school. So, that's one of the main reasons why the boys are set in PE. I think competitive sports lend themselves well to working in sets. Girls aren't as competitive. I'm pretty sure they wouldn't want to be in sets in PE. They prefer being

with their friends. They feel safer and more comfortable when they are learning in a cooperative way in PE". (Karen, Burnway)

Karen and Jill also contended that the span of abilities among groups of boys was markedly broader than in groups of girls, and that the nature of the PE curriculum meant that different grouping approaches should be used in boys' and girls' PE. When probed about why this was the case, Karen and Jill responded:

"We don't need to set girls because most of them are at the same level. There isn't that range. We don't have a mass of high-fliers. You'll get the odd one who stands out from the rest. In comparison, the difference between the top boy and the weaker boy is massive. That's part of the reason why they set them in PE". (Karen, Burnway)

"In social and creative activities, like dance and gymnastics, we encourage the girls to work together as a group. Most of the activities in the curriculum are about cooperation, teamwork and supporting each other. So, there is no real need to set them. With the boys, PE is more about competition. So, they are put into sets in PE". (Jill, Burnway)

Karen and Jill also engaged with discourses around equity and equal opportunities to interpret the policy of setting in PE. They raised concerns about the prospective negative impacts of setting on girls' sense of self and learning opportunities in PE. They suggested that mixed-ability grouping was a solution to these problems. For example, Karen and Jill viewed mixed-ability grouping positively for the opportunities it provided for cooperative and collaborative learning and for its contribution to social integration. They remarked:

"I would always go with mixed-ability grouping in PE. I know [Stephen] is all for setting but I'm not keen on it. I don't think it would benefit the girls. It might benefit the high-fliers, but we don't have many of them in PE. Is it fair that we use setting because they

might learn more? What about the other girls? I think that all girls benefit from mixed-ability grouping in PE. They can learn from each other in a supportive way. They are not labelled because they are not separated from each other in PE". (Karen, Burnway)

"Mixed-ability grouping is fairer than setting. You have all the girls together in one lesson. They can help each other in PE. You don't have some feeling crap. I know some of the lads feel like that. They feel like there's no point in trying in PE because they are in the bottom set. You also don't have some missing out on materials and opportunities because they are all together. So, you're not discriminating against certain girls. On the other hand, more able girls might make more progress and achieve more if we put them in sets. I don't think you can have it both ways though". (Jill, Burnway)

Jill's comments highlight some of the tensions associated with pedagogies that seek to simultaneously engage with discourses of equity and achievement in PE. They also indicate that her personal and professional history influenced the ways in which she interpreted the policy of setting in PE. For example, Jill recognised that setting could positively impact the achievement levels of more able girls in PE. However, she voiced concern about the inequitable nature of setting policy in PE. Jill drew on examples from boys' PE and research from her recently completed Masters Degree in Education to substantiate these claims. She explained:

"When I did my Masters, I read some of the research on this. What it was saying is that setting is good if you're more able. It can improve your achievement because you're pushed at a really high level. It was also saying that setting has a negative impact on the low ability pupils. They feel labelled and inferior and this can only be a bad thing. They also miss out on opportunities because teachers have low expectations of them. I've seen it with the boys who are in the bottom set here. I read that mixed-ability grouping is better and fairer because pupils can learn from each other. No one loses out". (Jill, Burnway)

Jill's awareness of research evidence enabled her to challenge dominant discourses on mixed-ability grouping. Similar findings have been reported in mathematics, English, and science classes (Boaler 1997a; Hamilton & O'Hara, 2011; Marks, 2012; Dracup, 2014). As I explained in Chapter Two, these discourses construct mixed-ability grouping as inimical to achievement. Jill believed that mixed-ability grouping was an equitable approach to raising achievement because all girls were treated fairly and equally in PE. Jill was primarily concerned with promoting high achievement for all girls in PE and this led her to support a policy that she felt was congruent with her beliefs and values.

Oakside

There was consensus on the need to separate pupils by ability in PE at Oakside. PE teachers drew on dominant discourses of setting to argue that the policy was paramount to raising levels of achievement in PE. They also made sense of the policy of setting in relation to the ethos of the school. For example, Dawn and Liam suggested that setting was an important policy because the school had an avowed aim to raise academic and sporting standards of achievement. This was explained in the following way:

> "The school is a sports college and has a number of targets it needs to hit. The focus is on academic and sporting achievement. They are both big concerns in the school. That's why there's a strong ethos of setting in the school. It's to make sure that kids make the best progress possible. We give them the best chance by putting them into sets". (Liam, Oakside)

PE teachers at Oakside made a point of highlighting the positive impact of setting on the achievement levels of more able pupils in PE. They were more equivocal about the impact of

the policy on the achievement levels of less able pupils in PE. For example, Dawn and Liam suggested that setting 'probably' had a positive impact on the achievement of less able pupils because they were more confident and comfortable in PE. Liam remarked:

> "I think setting is good for the more able students. They are all together and can learn from each other. We can push them hard to make sure they get their expected progress. I'm a bit more unsure about the less able though. I think it can probably improve their achievement as well. They are more confident and comfortable and that probably means they will make more progress in PE". (Liam, Oakside)

Dawn and Liam suggested that setting had a positive impact on the confidence and comfort levels of low ability pupils because they were less vulnerable to surveillance and judgement from more able peers in PE. They pointed out that ability differences were conspicuous in PE because pupils regularly needed to put themselves out there. Dawn and Liam explained that this meant that less able pupils were reluctant to perform in front of more able peers for fear of exposure and criticism. They believed that setting created a less threatening and judgemental environment for low ability pupils because they were with others of similar ability in PE. Dawn and Liam's views are typified by the following comment:

> "I think setting is a safety net for the less able. PE is a very public subject. It's not like maths where you know whether you have got an answer wrong and nobody else does. I think setting creates a safer environment. In mixed-ability groups the less able don't put themselves out there because they feel intimidated and judged. They feel more confident when they are with others who are similar in ability level to them". (Liam, Oakside).

Charlene, Andrew, and Paul took the opposite view. They asserted that low ability pupils needed more able peers to stimulate and enhance their learning in PE. Charlene, Andrew, and Paul recognised that setting deprived low ability pupils of this opportunity. Paul explained:

> "Setting benefits the more able because it pushes them on in terms of their performance. They are working to a high level in PE. I think it's different for the less able. They are only going to get better at PE if they play against the best opposition they can. You miss that with setting. The bottom set don't have the opportunity to learn from their more capable peers. It's a bit of an injustice". (Paul, Oakside)

PE teachers at Oakside identified several limitations of the policy of setting in PE. For example, Charlene, Andrew, and Paul expressed concern about the labelling and stigmatisation that inexorably accompanied setting in PE. Andrew explained:

> "I'm kind of in favour of setting but I'm worried about pupils who are in the bottom set. The negativity attached to being in the bottom set can damage self-esteem and confidence. They quickly realise what set they are in and start labelling each other. They end up feeling negative about PE. It isn't going to help their achievement either. I've seen it first-hand. I'm very uneasy with it". (Andrew, Oakside)

Andrew was keen to stress his commitment to providing an equitable learning environment for all pupils in PE but conceded that he had little choice other than to prioritise the needs of the more able. This meant that Andrew continued to 'support' the policy of setting in PE despite its limitations. He commented:

> "In an ideal world it would be great to give all pupils the same chances in PE, but my hands are tied. The pressures from above are all about achievement. We need to hit our achievement targets. That's what we're judged on. I'm not judged on making someone confident, comfortable or motivated in PE. I'm judged on A* to C grades. That's my priority. I just have to play the game unfortunately". (Andrew, Oakside)

Charlene, Paul, Dawn, and Liam also spoke candidly about the pressures they faced to raise standards of achievement in PE. They noted that the demands of the LEA and the senior leadership team meant that achievement had to take precedence over other considerations in PE. Dawn suggested that this was particularly so because the school was a specialist sports college, with continued funding dependent upon A* to C grades in GCSE PE. She explained:

> "I want everyone to have the same opportunities to achieve in PE. I feel like I'm forced to prioritise the needs of the more able though. I think it's because we are a sports college. We need to hit our A* to C grade targets otherwise we will have our funding removed. That's why we set students in PE. Setting is good for the more able students and their achievement. It's not exactly fair for the less able though. They are denied access to GCSE PE. You can't have it both ways with setting". (Dawn, Oakside).

Liam was particularly concerned about the achievement levels of more able pupils in PE. He explained that as the PE HoD at Oakside, he was held accountable for standards of achievement in the subject. He indicated, therefore, that he had to raise achievement by any means necessary, even if this meant compromising his beliefs about teaching and learning. Liam's comments included:

> "I need to hit my benchmarks. If I don't it's on me. I have sports college targets that I'm bound by. I'm also answerable to governing bodies. I need to reach those targets by any means necessary. It keeps me on my toes. I think that's a good thing to be honest. Things are going well at the minute. I'm hitting my targets and getting a pat on the back from the leadership team. I must be doing something right". (Liam, Oakside)

> "I don't necessarily agree with everything that I do in PE. It's a 'needs must' situation. I need to do everything I possibly can to increase standards". (Liam, Oakside)

Liam also reported that setting was important for the marketability of PE in the school. For example, he suggested that setting was a selling point for GCSE PE because it conveyed the impression to parents and more able pupils that the subject was valued in the school. Liam said:

> "I think setting has a positive impact on GCSE take up. If our more able kids are having a positive experience, then they will be more likely to come back and do GCSE PE. It means they can move forward faster and they aren't held back by others. I think parents like setting as well. It lets them know that we are a valued subject in the school. That we are an option for their kids at GCSE". (Liam, Oakside)

Liam explained that that he had to compete with other subjects in the curriculum for pupil enrolments. This was of concern because the viability of GCSE PE was contingent on recruiting pupils who would attain A* to C grades. The use of setting was important because it enabled Liam to advertise and promote GCSE PE to pupils in the top set. Liam remarked:

> "We're driven by numbers in terms of whether our theory courses run or not. I've got to do everything I can to make sure the subject is safe. We're competing for students with other subjects in the school. You've got other schools and colleges trying to dip in as well. One thing that gets you noticed is good results. I use setting to target good students who will get us the A* to C grades. If we're getting the best results, then we will be valued as a proper subject in the school". (Liam, Oakside)

The comments from PE teachers at Oakside highlight the impact of performativity on the ways in which they interpreted the policy of setting in PE. PE teachers believed that they were judged by their pupils' examination results and this led them to increasingly focus on those who they believed would attain A* to C grades in GCSE PE. It also meant that they 'supported' policies that would positively impact the outcomes of more able pupils in PE. This included the policy of setting. As Ball (2012, p. 20) explains, "the effect of performativity is to re-orient

pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those who are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes". PE teachers were less concerned about the affective outcomes of pupils in PE because they had no "immediate measurable performative value" (Ball, 2012a, p. 20). This was evident in Andrew's comment that he was not "judged on making someone confident, comfortable, or motivated in PE". PE teachers at Oakside were also less anxious about the adverse impacts of setting on pupils in the middle and bottom sets in PE because they would not contribute to the A* to C grade metric (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Ball *et al*., 2012b). These pupils were restricted from entry to GCSE PE at Oakside.

Amy, like Thomas at Burnway, provided a different perspective on the way in which policy was interpreted in PE. Amy had only been teaching at Oakside for one year and relied heavily on other members of the department for guidance and direction. For example, Amy noted that she had met with Liam on several occasions to get up to speed with different policies in PE. In contrast to Thomas, however, Amy was aware of the advantages and disadvantages of setting pupils in PE. She noted that her recent experiences in post-graduate education provided her with the space to explore and reflect on the policy. Amy's comments included:

> "I've only been here for a year. Everything's still a bit new to me. I used to meet [Liam] regularly to get up to speed with things. I didn't know what the policies were or what I had to do. [Liam] told me what was expected of me and why". (Amy, Oakside)

> "I didn't have to ask [Liam] about setting in PE. That's one thing I didn't have to ask about. I read a bit about setting last year so I have a good idea about it". (Amy, Oakside)

Amy explained that as a new member of the PE department, she was distant from decision making in PE. She indicated that policy was something that came from Liam and the senior

leadership team. Similar findings have been reported by Ball *et al*. (2011a), Sullivan and Morrison (2014), and Maguire *et al*. (2015). Amy remarked:

> "I think I'm protected in PE. I don't need to make any important decisions. I can rely on [Liam] to do that and tell me what I need to do. I don't agree with some of the things he says but I just get on with it. I know what's good and bad about setting but I'm not in the position to point this out and question Liam. What he says goes". (Amy, Oakside)

Amy's comments demonstrate that issues of power and positionality were important in shaping the way in which she engaged with the policy of setting in PE. As Sullivan and Morrison (2014, p. 604) explain, "teachers at early stages in their careers are often perceived as receivers of policy, that is policy is done to them". Amy did not take an active role in interpreting the policy of setting in PE. Instead, she felt that it was important to be compliant with Liam's policy demands. Amy therefore chose not to act on her knowledge of setting in PE because of the power differential between herself and Liam. Indeed, Amy suggested that she was not able to challenge Liam on his interpretation of setting because she was new in the school and Liam was the PE HoD.

Sandwest

PE teachers at Sandwest, like most of those at Oakside, highlighted the pressures on their time and energies in PE. They reported that they were under significant time pressures to respond to multiple policy demands in the school. This resulted in them thinking more pragmatically about policies in PE. For example, James, Matthew, and Charlotte explained that they had little time to cater adequately for pupils in mixed-ability groups in PE. Setting was regarded as a more time-efficient method of organising learning. James, Matthew, and Charlotte noted that

they found it easier to plan for and teach pupils in sets because they were of similar ability in PE. In this regard, they felt they could target a narrower range of pace and content of lessons. This finding is consistent with research in mathematics, English, and science classes (Boaler, 1997a; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Hallam *et al*., 2004a; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Araújo, 2007). Matthew explained:

> "I'm in favour of setting because it makes my teaching easier. I'm extremely busy and don't think I could do mixed-ability grouping justice. I haven't got time to plan such a wide range of tasks in PE. Setting is a stress off for me. I can set tasks that meet the needs of all learners rather than just one or two. Differentiation can be a lot more specific and focussed. So, it's beneficial in that sense". (Matthew, Sandwest)

PE teachers at Sandwest also frequently talked about the pressures from Ofsted and the senior leadership team to use setting in PE. For example, James, Susan, and Charlotte reported that they had attended local meetings at which Ofsted inspectors were exhorting schools to set pupils in PE. James, the PE HoD at Sandwest, explained that these meetings were attended by PE teachers in schools that had received a poor Ofsted report and were aimed at developing more effective policies to tackle underachievement in PE. James spoke positively about these meetings, asserting that they opened lines of communication between Ofsted and PE teachers and enabled him to discuss ideas with colleagues from other schools. His comments included:

> "I went to an Ofsted meeting a couple of months ago and they were saying that their preferred approach is setting. They expect all schools to set pupils in PE. They were saying that you can push the high ability on a lot more when you have them in sets. They were also saying that you can't maximise achievement in mixed-ability groups because the ability range is too wide". (James, Sandwest)

> "I thought the meeting with Ofsted was useful. We were able to ask inspectors what we need to do to raise achievement in PE. They were telling us that we need to differentiate between high and low achievers and monitor the needs of the more able in PE. We were also able to discuss things with teachers in other schools like ours". (James, Sandwest)

James, Susan, and Charlotte talked about setting pupils in PE to garner approval from Ofsted inspectors. They believed that they would be rewarded with a higher Ofsted inspection rating for following their advice to set pupils in PE. According to James, this was particularly important because the school was identified as requiring improvement in its most recent Ofsted inspection. He explained:

> "When Ofsted are telling you that you need to set, then you need to take them seriously. We've no choice because we're rated as requiring improvement. So, setting is the way to go because it means your back is covered when Ofsted come in and inspect you. You're more likely to get a better grade and we certainly need it. Ofsted even told us they would mark us down if we didn't set pupils in PE". (James, Sandwest)

James, Susan, and Charlotte's comments highlight the capacity of Ofsted to influence directly and indirectly the ways in which they interpreted the policy of setting in PE. James, Susan, and Charlotte reported that they had attended meetings with Ofsted inspectors to discuss policy issues in PE. Here, inspectors informed them of the need to use setting to raise levels of achievement in PE. In Ball *et al.*'s (2012a, p. 38) terms, these meetings were "key sites of policy information and dissemination". Ofsted were also able to use their inspection regime as a lever to promote the policy of setting in PE at Sandwest. For example, James's decision to use setting in PE was motivated by the requirements of accountability (Ball, 2009; Singh, 2015; Pinto, 2015). From a Foucauldian perspective, the Ofsted inspection regime is a technique of government that "gives rise to a general method of discipline" (Ball *et al*., 2012b, p. 514). In

the case of James, it functioned to regulate or control the way in which he thought about the policy of setting in PE (Foucault, 1972, 1979, 1990; Gore, 1995). James felt that he had no choice but to comply with Ofsted's demands for setting in PE. This was compounded by the fact that the school was rated as requiring improvement by Ofsted. James hoped that by acceding to Ofsted's demands he would be rewarded with a better grade in the next round of inspections.

The pressures to set pupils in PE created ethical dilemmas for Susan. For example, Susan acknowledged that mixed-ability grouping was 'probably' the right thing to do but suggested that the policy was incompatible with the requirements of Ofsted and the new National Curriculum in PE [NCPE]. Susan explained:

> "Mixed-ability grouping is probably the right thing to do. I mean we used to teach PE in mixed-ability groups. In an ideal world we still would. We found it increasingly difficult with Ofsted breathing down our necks. The new curriculum didn't help either. The days of bringing pupils in and getting them to coach each other, take leadership roles and do peer assessments are gone. I quite liked the idea of this. It's all about competition and high intensity now though. That's what Ofsted are telling us. If you have the high ability pupils together, they can show high intensity and competitiveness". (Susan, Sandwest)

Susan spoke about her obligation to do what was best for all pupils in PE and acknowledged that mixed-ability grouping enabled her to do this. However, she explained that it was expedient to set pupils in PE because the school was under considerable pressure to improve levels of achievement. In this regard, Susan noted that her policy decisions were often influenced by what the senior leadership team and Ofsted wanted her to do rather than by her own beliefs about teaching and learning in PE. This is evident in the following remarks:

> "I'm committed to doing what's best for all students. It's just not that easy. We're under pressure because the school is struggling. I mean mixed-ability grouping is probably the best thing for all students, but we are forced to think a bit more strategically. The senior leadership team have told us that we need to use setting to raise the achievement levels of the more able. I think it's a school wide thing". (Susan, Sandwest)

> "We sometimes do things to jump through hoops. It's a bit of a tick box exercise and it's frustrating. We're already rated as requiring improvement and we can't afford to be rated as inadequate. So, we have no choice but to do what Ofsted tell us. We do things because we think they are what Ofsted want us to do. We might not even agree with them and they might not benefit us or our students. It's frustrating". (Susan, Sandwest)

James, Susan, and Charlotte, like PE teachers at Oakside, were aware of the negative impacts of setting on less able pupils in PE. The source of this awareness came from their experiences of teaching pupils in mixed-ability groups and sets in PE. For example, James, Susan, and Charlotte expressed discomfort about separating low ability pupils from peers who could enhance their learning in PE. They were also concerned about labelling pupils as low ability and, as I explain in Chapter Six, this led them to use colours to refer to different sets in PE. Charlotte, for example, commented:

> "I don't like the idea of using labels in PE. I've seen the impact that the low ability label can have in PE. They are also learning away from more able peers who could help them in their learning in PE. They are the big things". (Charlotte, Sandwest)

Susan explained that her concerns about setting went unheeded in the face of pressures to raise the achievement levels of more able pupils in the school. She said:

> "I mean I raised my concerns [about setting] with the senior leadership team, but it didn't make a difference. It's all about A* to Cs. That's one of the things the school is judged on. So, that's the focus really. If we don't improve, we could all be out of a job. I guess it's easier just to do what they say. I did try though". (Charlotte, Sandwest)

Despite their concerns, PE teachers at Sandwest continued to use setting in PE. Their comments indicated that this decision reflected "performative policy demands and pressures" (Hardy, 2014, p. 2). For example, James and Susan explained that they had been told by the senior leadership team and Ofsted to use setting in PE to improve the school's performance indicators. In this case, its Ofsted rating and the number of pupils achieving A* to C grades in GCSE examinations (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Ball *et al*., 2012b). This situation created some conflict for Susan, who reported a preference for mixed-ability grouping in PE. The pressure to improve the school's performance indicators meant that Susan felt constrained to use setting in PE. In this regard, as Ball (2000) points out, her professional judgement was "subordinated to the requirements of performativity and marketing" (p. 17). This left Susan, like James, feeling that she had little control over the policy of setting in PE.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings reported in this chapter demonstrate that PE teachers interpreted the policy of setting in different ways in PE in the three case study schools. This was a complex process that involved the interplay between teachers' personal values, interests, and positions, contextual factors, including school reputation and ethos, and pressures to raise levels of achievement in PE. For example, drawing on his experiences of setting as a pupil and the ethos of the school, Mark argued that setting was beneficial for pupil learning in PE at Burnway. In contrast, Amy relied on advice from more experienced colleagues to make sense of the policy of setting in PE

at Oakside. The data presented in this chapter also revealed that PE teachers at Oakside and Sandwest interpreted the policy of setting in relation to the expectations and requirements of various stakeholders, including the senior leadership team, LEA, and Ofsted. More specifically, these stakeholders expected PE teachers to use setting to raise standards, receive continued funding, and score a high grade in inspections. Setting was therefore viewed by PE teaches at Oakside and Sandwest as an important means of achieving status and securing support and resources for PE. This finding supports the view that that teachers mediate internal and external demands in interpreting policy in schools (Ball *et al*., 2012a; Maguire *et al*., 2015; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017).

Dominant discourses of setting prevailed in the three case study schools. PE teachers adopted the dominant discourse that setting raises achievement because it enables pupils to learn alongside peers who are of a similar ability level. They particularly emphasised the importance of the policy of setting for pupils in the top set in PE. PE teachers in each school reported that setting enabled these pupils to cover content at a fast pace because they were not held back by less able pupils in PE. They also suggested that setting alleviated boredom and increased motivation in top set pupils because they were more engaged in learning. Teachers in studies of setting in mathematics, English, and science classes have expressed similar views (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Boaler *et al*., 2000; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2002; Muijs & Dunne, 2010; Hamilton & O'Hara, 2011; Marks, 2012; Francis *et al*., 2017).

The research findings also show that most PE teachers made sense of the policy of setting in relation to the demands of performativity. In doing so, the teachers reflected the wider policy contexts that they were working amidst. This was particularly the case at Oakside where the

school was a specialist sports college and Sandwest where the school was under scrutiny from the LEA for its low levels of attainment. Most PE teachers at Oakside and Sandwest reported feeling pressured by the senior leadership team, Ofsted, and the LEA to raise standards in PE. They also felt that they had to provide equitable opportunities for all pupils to learn and achieve in PE. These sets of interests were perceived to be incompatible, particularly as they related to setting in PE. For example, while Dawn and Andrew suggested that setting had a positive impact on the achievement levels of more able pupils in PE, they also acknowledged that setting was inequitable because it inhibited the learning of less able pupils in PE. Most PE teachers at Oakside and Sandwest described a situation where they felt compelled to focus their attention on the achievement of more able pupils. This finding is consistent with a growing body of research in education and PE (Gewirtz *et al*., 1993; Ball *et al*., 2011c; Grimaldi, 2012; Evans, 2013; Hardy, 2014; Pinto, 2015; Hall, 2018). Most PE teachers at Oakside and Sandwest asserted that they were held personally accountable for pupils' achievement and attainment in PE. The importance of A* to C grades in GCSE examinations was particularly prominent in their comments. They also reported that they had to negotiate multiple demands on their time and energy in PE. Most PE teachers at Oakside and Sandwest were therefore supportive of the policy of setting because they believed that it enhanced the achievement of more able pupils in PE. It also helped them better manage the demands placed on them because they found it easier to plan for and teach pupils who were at a similar level of ability in PE.

The demands of performativity had significant impacts on PE teachers and their subjectivities at Oakside and Sandwest. Not only did they affect the ways in which PE teachers interpreted the policy of setting in PE, but they also had consequences for the ways in which they felt about themselves and their ability to act and influence policy. The research findings revealed that there were some contradictions between PE teachers' pedagogical beliefs and their beliefs

about the policy of setting in PE. For example, Charlene, Andrew, and Paul did not necessarily agree with the policy because they wanted all pupils to have the same opportunities to achieve in PE at Oakside. Nonetheless, they 'supported' the policy because they had to raise the achievement levels of more able pupils to cope with the demands from the LEA. As Ball (2003) explains, performativity requires individual teachers to "set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation" (p. 215). Similar views were expressed by PE teachers at Sandwest, however, they explicitly referred to the demands from Ofsted. In Foucauldian terms, these demands can be explained through the lens of governmentality (Foucault, 1991b, 2000). The LEA and Ofsted were using disciplinary technologies to shape the thoughts and conduct of PE teachers (Rose & Miller, 1992; Takayama, 2012; Hall, 2018). For example, PE teachers at Oakside explained that the LEA were threatening to remove funding if they did not reach their targets. They felt, therefore, that they had no choice but to do what the LEA and Ofsted expected of them. It is important to note that the impacts of performativity were not all negative. Ball (2010, p. 126) reminds us that performativity "offers satisfactions and rewards, at least to some". This was most evident in Liam's comments at Oakside. Liam explained that he felt a sense of achievement from hitting his targets and receiving recognition from the senior leadership team for doing so.

Alongside the acceptance of dominant discourses, there was some evidence of resistance to discourses of setting in the case study schools (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b). Jill at Burnway and Susan at Sandwest appropriated the dominant discourses of setting but in doing so, brought a discourse of equity into play. Jill and Susan recognised that setting could have a positive impact on the achievement levels of more able pupils in PE but also challenged the benefits of setting for all pupils in PE. Jill indicated that her Masters Degree in Education provided her with the opportunity to interpret the policy in a more critical way. Susan had experience of teaching

pupils in both mixed-ability groups and sets in PE. This gave her space to challenge Ofsted and the LEA's claims about the efficacy of setting policy in PE. Two of the teachers at Burnway (Jill and Karen) drew on gendered discourses to interpret the policy of setting in PE. Jill and Karen argued that boys should be taught in sets and girls in mixed-ability groups in PE because they have different needs, interests, and abilities. As I explain in more detail in Chapter Six, this led them to enact a policy of mixed-ability grouping in girls' PE.

In conclusion, data relating to teachers' interpretation of setting policy illustrated that interpretation is a process of balancing and negotiating personal perspectives, institutional agendas, and the influence of wider policy contexts. The data presented shows the extent to which dominant discourses of setting are embedded systematically in contemporary education and are seen as legitimate and important in the context of responding to the demands and pressures associated with accountability and performativity. At the same time, data illustrated that some teachers are able to appropriate other discourses, including those of mixed-ability grouping and gender equity, to resist and/or mediate dominant discourses of setting in their interpretation of policy. The next chapter takes these issues further by examining the enactment of setting policy in PE. Several key issues are raised, including the importance of individual and contextual factors, the pressures of performativity, and the surveillance of PE teachers through inspection regimes. The interplay of these factors means that the policy of setting is not translated into practice in any straightforward manner.

CHAPTER SIX: THE ENACTMENT OF SETTING IN KEY STAGE 3 AND KEY STAGE 4 PE: TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how PE teachers enact the policy of setting in secondary school PE. It focuses on data from interviews with sixteen PE teachers to address what setting involved and looked like, from organisational, management, and pedagogical perspectives in three case study schools. The chapter thus moves discussion beyond teachers' interpretation/s of policy (see Chapter Five) to consider how policy is translated into practice. Maguire *et al*. (2013, p. 330) explain that "the processes of interpretation and translation are not separated out rigidly in practice". As such, the chapter necessarily includes some discussion of PE teachers' interpretation/s of policy. The chapter draws on conceptualisations presented by Foucault (1979, 1980b, 1991) and Ball *et al*. (2012a) to challenge the inevitability and passivity of the policy process in schools. PE teachers are situated as actors with the capacity to enact policies in "original and creative ways" (Ball *et al*., 2012a, p. 2) within the opportunities and constraints presented by school culture, the location and reputation of the PE department in the school, and broader accountability pressures.

The chapter is structured in two sections. The first section focusses on the ways in which the policy of setting was enacted by PE teachers in the three case study schools. I discuss each school separately to facilitate understanding of the different ways they enacted setting in PE. I also consider the factors that directly or indirectly influenced the enactment of setting in PE in the case study schools. Here, I draw on Braun *et al*.'s (2011b) and Ball *et al*.'s (2012) heuristic framework as a means of better understanding the role of context in the enactment of setting in

PE. As I explained in Chapter Four, Braun *et al*. (2011b) and Ball *et al*. (2012) identify four interrelated contextual dimensions that shape how policies are enacted in schools. These dimensions are identified as situated (e.g. locale, school histories, and intakes), material (e.g. staffing, budget, buildings, and infrastructure), professional (e.g. values, teacher commitments, and experiences), and external (e.g. pressures and expectations from Ofsted and the LEA). I also draw on Foucault's work to examine issues of power and positionality in the enactment of setting in PE in the case study schools. The second and last section of the chapter provides a summary of the main findings and leads into Chapter Sevens discussion of the impact of setting on pupils and their subjectivities in PE.

Burnway

PE teachers at Burnway believed that the PE department was free to determine its own policy on ability grouping in PE. In this regard, boys were taught in sets and girls in mixed-ability groups in PE. Stephen, Burnway's PE HoD, pointed out:

> "We certainly don't have the senior leadership team telling us what we need to do. We are left to our own devices and can do it in our own way. We do what we think is best for us and for our students in PE. So, we've gone with setting. The girls have gone with mixed-ability grouping". (Stephen, Burnway)

Stephen, Mark, and Stuart suggested that the status of PE in the broader school allowed them to make their own decisions about how they enacted the policy of setting in PE. For example, they noted that setting was more explicitly structured in mathematics, English, and science than in PE. Mark suggested this was because these were high-status subjects in the school. Mark explained that high-status subjects were those subjects that the achievement level of the school

was measured by. He asserted, therefore, that there was more space for original and creative attempts at policy enactment in lower-stakes policy setting, including PE. The focus on mathematics, English, and science in the school also meant that the enactment of setting in PE was less visible to the senior leadership team. This finding supports the suggestion of Maguire *et al*. (2015) that high visibility in some subjects can lend a "cloak of invisibility to others" (p. 494). These sentiments were reflected in Mark's comments:

> "We're not a high-status subject in the school. We're just PE and I don't think the senior leadership team care about what we do. I don't think they know. We go under the radar and can do what we want. So, we choose to set them. I'm pretty sure that the senior leadership team haven't told us that we need to set them. It's totally different in other subjects in the school. The senior leadership team have told maths, English and science teachers to set students. They've also told them how they should do it". (Mark, Burnway)

Stephen, Mark, and Stuart also reported that the location of the PE department in the school made the enactment of setting less visible to the senior leadership team. For example, Stuart noted that the PE department was located away from the main school building and that most lessons took place in locations that were less accessible to the senior leadership team. These factors provided opportunities for PE teachers to experiment with new teaching approaches in PE. This finding is consistent with that of Maguire *et al*. (2015, p. 494), who found that "physical invisibility can sometimes remove the pressures to enact policies" in particular ways. As Stuart commented:

> "We're separate from the rest of the school. You'll have noticed that our PE office is situated away from the main building. It's the same with our sports hall and our fields. We can try different things in PE because we don't have the senior leadership team checking up on us all the time. They wouldn't come to PE anyway. Can you imagine

them standing out in the rain watching us teach football? It doesn't happen. Even if it did, they wouldn't have a clue what they were looking for". (Stuart, Burnway)

Stephen and Mark also noted that setting was a collective rather than an individual enterprise in PE at Burnway. They highlighted the importance of PE teachers working together to ensure that the policy was enacted in a unified and coordinated manner. This finding is not dissimilar to those of Davies *et al*. (2003) whose research suggested that consistency of practice was a major concern for teachers using setting in primary schools in England. Stephen and Mark felt that consultation was especially important when working with a flexible policy framework. For example, Mark commented:

"It's not down to one individual member of staff to decide how we use setting in PE. We sit down as a team at the start of the year and discuss how we're going to go about it. We are given no guidance on how to do it. So, it is important that we meet regularly to make sure that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet and not going off and doing our own thing". (Mark, Burnway)

Notwithstanding Stephen, Mark, and Stuart's belief that they had the freedom to make their own decisions about how they enacted the policy of setting in PE, their comments frequently included reference to school ethos factors. For example, Stephen and Stuart revealed that their approach to setting reflected the schools' commitment to pupil choice and participation. They indicated that the allocation process allowed pupils to decide for themselves which set they wanted to be in for PE lessons. In this regard, Stephen, Mark, and Stuart were sharing their power and control with pupils in PE. This approach reflects Foucault's (1979, 1980b, 1991) conceptualisation of power as fluid and productive. This is evident in the following remark:

> "We set students by allowing them to choose the set that they are in. We do it in this way because the ethos of the school is all about student participation and choice. So, it's about giving the students control and freedom in setting decisions. I suppose it also means that if the students pick the groups, we can tell them that they made the decision and they need to be sticking with it". (Stephen, Burnway)

While Stephen, Mark, and Stuart asserted that setting decisions were at the discretion of individual boys in PE, their actions can be interpreted as relating to what Foucault (1979) and Gore (1995) describe as surveillance and control. In the following excerpt, Stephen alludes to this in stating that PE teachers sit and watch pupils and can make decisions for them if they feel they have chosen an unsuitable set. Implicit in this assumption is a particular view of ability. For example, Stephen, Mark, and Stuart suggested that pupils would often self-select sets based solely on friendship, with the implication that pupils would be of markedly different physical abilities in sets in PE. It was thus clear that pupils could not freely choose their set for PE lessons. Instead, as I explain below, setting decisions reflected Stephen, Mark, and Stuart's judgements about their physical abilities, rather than where they felt comfortable as learners in PE. By exercising their capacity to make the final decision on the formation of sets, Stephen, Mark, and Stuart reinforced rather than disrupted 'traditional' teacher-pupil power relations and perhaps restricted the boys' opportunity to feel a sense of empowerment in PE (Gore, 1995; McEvilly, 2012; Cowie, 2015). This is exemplified in the following account:

> "Nine times out of ten they will just pick friendship groups. When they do this, we tend to find that their level of ability isn't suitable to the level of those they are working with. So, we literally sit and watch them. If we think they have picked a group that isn't suitable for them, we guide them and shuffle them around a bit. We let the students try and make a sensible decision, but if they are taking the mick, we will make the decision for them. They know what we expect of them, but we make the final decision". (Stephen, Burnway)

Stephen, Mark, and Stuart indicated that they were using their own judgements about pupils' abilities to allocate them to sets. Notably, they defined ability in corporeal terms, emphasising the importance of pupils' physical appearances, body shapes, and sizes. This reflects findings in previous research, where the appearances of bodies have been central in definitions of ability in PE (Hunter, 2004; Hay & lisahunter, 2006; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b; Croston, 2013, 2014; Croston & Hills, 2017; Tidén *et al*., 2017). Stephen, Mark, and Stuart were privileging the physical nature of ability in PE. They were also judging pupils' body shapes with certain sport related movement skills in mind, including throwing, catching, running, tackling, and passing. Stephen, Mark, and Stuart thus asserted that they could judge pupils' varying abilities simply and easily by observing them. This is evident in the following remark:

> "You can just tell if someone's able in PE. It's those things that are just apparent. It's a visual thing. You can step back and watch them. They just stand out. It's their physical appearance. They just look the part. They are athletic and keep themselves fit and healthy. They are competent in their own body movements. On the other hand, if they are unfit and overweight, they are probably going to struggle in PE. So, their appearance can provide an indication of the set they will be in. You can tell quite a lot from that. I don't know if that's me being narrow minded but that's how I see ability". (Mark, Burnway)

Stephen, Mark, and Stuart indicated further that they were able to make very quick decisions about pupils' abilities based on initial impressions of their physical appearance. This would have enabled them to select pupils for sets with relative ease in Year 7 PE. However, Stephen, Mark, and Stuart suggested that they enacted mixed-ability grouping to allow pupils to settle in to PE in Year 7. This view was exemplified by statements like the following:

> "We can pretty much tell who will be in the top set just by looking at them. So, we could probably put them in to sets in Year 7. The students would still have that choice and we

would guide them. But we use mixed-ability grouping to give them time to settle in. It gives them time to get to know each other before they are separated in Year 8". (Stephen, Burnway)

It was evident that other factors were also influencing decisions about the placement of pupils into sets in PE at Burnway. Stuart suggested that he considered behaviour in allocating pupils to sets, although this was to a lesser extent than their ability. This is clear in the following extract:

"I also look at other factors like their behaviour. If they aren't behaving, then they aren't going to be able to show their ability in PE. I suppose you might also say that if they are able, then they have less reason to be acting out in PE. So, for me, it's very much ability based, but behaviour plays a part as well". (Stuart, Burnway)

Stuart's comments highlight the intersection of discourses of ability and behaviour in his setting decisions in PE. This contention aligns with the wider evidence that some teachers construct ability to include notions of behaviour (Ball, 1981; Araújo, 2007; Marks, 2012, 2014). As Marks (2012, p. 48) explains, "ability is such a pervasive, and in a particular sense, useful, discourse, that schooling allows other differences to be recontextualised as ability differences".

PE teachers at Burnway reported that setting was a flexible system that allowed pupils to move if they were inappropriately placed. They observed, however, that the impetus for movement often came from the pupils themselves. This meant that social factors, such as friendship groups, were often the main consideration in moving pupils between sets in PE. The following quote exemplifies this point:

> "When we allow the students to self-select their sets, we find that they usually go with their friends. This sometimes creates problems for us. It means that our movements are mainly based on social reasons, rather than ability or prior attainment. We tend to find that when friendship groups fall out, students come to us asking if they can change sets. So, we might tell a student to go into a different set until they feel a bit happier. If they are, they are probably going to be making more progress". (Thomas, Burnway)

PE teachers at Burnway asserted that the opportunities for movement between sets were restricted by the structure of the PE curriculum and the constraints of the timetable. Mark and Stuart explained that PE was taught on a rotational basis, with different sets covering different parts of the curriculum over a six-week period. They were thus disinclined to move pupils because it would mean that they would miss or repeat some of the activities in the PE curriculum. Mark and Stuart also argued that the way the PE curriculum was organised at Burnway had important implications for the points at which it was possible to move pupils between sets in PE. In this regard, they indicated that movement usually took place at the end of the school year to allow pupils to complete all the activities in the PE curriculum. This approach resulted in a situation where movement between sets was infrequent, taking place mostly on an annual basis. The following comments highlight these issues:

> "The way we've timetabled the activities can be a bit of a barrier to moving students between ability groups. We've had problems in the past where we've moved students and they have missed out on certain sports. They do different activities at different times. So, if they are doing an activity for six weeks, and I move them to another group, they might repeat that activity and miss another that they are really looking forward to. So, we tend to avoid moving students during this time. We usually leave it until the end of the year when they have finished their activities". (Mark, Burnway)

Karen and Jill chose to enact a policy of mixed-ability grouping in girls' PE. Karen explained:

> "We decided to use mixed-ability grouping with the girls. It was a joint decision between me and [Jill]. We didn't have to go through [Stephen] or the senior leadership team. We just got together and decided that we were going to stick with it". (Karen, Burnway)

Karen and Jill explained that they were using within-class ability grouping to organise girls in mixed-ability PE lessons. They were keen to emphasise that within-class ability grouping was a surreptitious way of grouping girls in mixed-ability groups in PE. The girls were thus not formally arranged into sets at Burnway, but still experienced grouping based on ability within PE lessons. Karen and Jill brought concepts of ability and hierarchy into their explanations of within-class ability grouping in PE. For example, Jill drew on gender-related discourses when expressing an expectation that some girls had limited abilities and must be separated from other girls in mixed-ability groups in PE. Jill's investment in such discourses meant that she positioned within-class ability grouping as an important pedagogical practice in PE. She put it like this:

> "Rightly or wrongly, we still make judgements about girls in mixed-ability groups. There's no getting away from the fact that some of the girls have limited ability. There isn't such a gap, but some just stand out. So, we manage that by putting them into smaller groups within the mixed-ability groups. The girls don't know we're doing this, but it just means that we can narrow the ability range within lessons a bit". (Jill, Burnway)

Karen and Jill were using judgements of ability and a combination of friendship, behaviour, and choice to make within-class ability grouping decisions in PE. For example, Karen remarked:

> "I suppose we also use within-class ability grouping to separate girls. I suppose we call it that, but it's also based on friendship and behaviour. Sometimes you get some who disrupt those performing at a high level. So, we can separate them to make sure that the more able girls continue to perform well. We also sometimes let the girls decide on the groups they want to be in. They think they are just friendship groups". (Karen, Burnway)

Karen's comments highlight that her pedagogical practices were influenced by performative concerns. As Ball (2000, p. 8) points out, "we choose and judge our actions and they are judged by others on the basis of their contribution to organisational performance". In the English Education system, as I explained in Chapter Two, schools and teachers are largely 'judged' by their pupils' examination results, particularly those in the A* to C grade boundary. Karen thus felt that she had to separate disruptive girls from high performing girls to maximise the progress of high performing girls in PE. She explained it in the following way:

> "We live and die by our students' grades. I suppose we have less pressure in PE. We still have to think about how we improve our grades though. I suppose sometimes it might mean that we give more attention to the ones that are going to get us the good grades. Within-class ability grouping helps with that because we can put the girls into small groups and remove any misbehaving girls that might distract the ones that are performing well". (Karen, Burnway).

Oakside

In contrast to Burnway, PE teachers at Oakside indicated that the policy of setting was prescribed by the senior leadership team. For example, Liam, Oakside's PE HoD, commented:

> "Don't get me wrong, I'm all for setting kids, but it wasn't my decision. I was told by the senior leadership team that I needed to use setting to raise standards. No problem at all. Like I said before, setting raises standards in PE. What I do have a problem with is them telling me how I should be setting kids in PE. I had a meeting with the senior leadership team the other week and they told me in no uncertain terms that I needed to take into consideration maths, English and science scores when I put kids into sets. There was no mention of their PE scores. As a middle leader, I'm not going to allow that to happen". (Liam, Oakside)

Liam suggested that the main reason why the PE department was susceptible to policy intervention was because the school was a specialist sports college. According to Liam, this designation elevated the status of the PE department in the school. This was expressed by Liam in the following terms:

> "The senior leadership team show interest in us because we are a sports college. It's quite a driving force in the school. The school needs to be seen to be doing well in PE. If it doesn't, it's my head on the line. Like I said earlier, we are under pressure to hit sports college targets. If we don't, we could lose that status [and, as a consequence, also lose significant funding]. That's why the senior leadership team are interested in us. I'm pretty sure that PE departments in other schools don't have the senior leadership team on their backs telling them what they should and shouldn't be doing". (Liam, Oakside)

Liam shared the views of the senior leadership team on the value of setting in PE but opposed their views on how setting should be enacted in PE. Liam asserted that pupils should, first and foremost, be set according to their PE-specific abilities in PE. When asked to explain this, he stated:

> "We set pupils primarily on their PE abilities. We are PE, after all. I don't think academic subjects have that much relevance to PE. So, why would we set them only on their maths, English, and science abilities? I suppose I understand why they've asked me to do it. The students probably feel more comfortable staying in their academic sets in PE. It would also keep things consistent and there wouldn't be any administration issues, like getting names changed on electronic registers. There's also GCSE PE". (Liam, Oakside)

Liam was firm in his belief that he had the power to resist the senior leadership teams' policy demands. The key to this resistance was the success and reputation of the PE department in the school. For example, Liam claimed that he was in a strong position to subvert the demands of the senior leadership team because the PE department produced some of the best GCSE results in the school. This notion aligns with Maguire *et al.*'s (2015, p. 496) assertion that "departments vary in degrees of their earned autonomy and institutional confidence, often in relation to their output performances, and being seen as well performing or even outstanding". Liam added the caveat that he would only be able to maintain this position if the PE department continued to be successful. He asserted:

> "Our reputation speaks for itself. We consistently produce some of the best GCSE results in the school, but I don't think we get the credit we deserve because we are PE. It does have its benefits though. If the senior leadership team tell me to do something, and I don't agree, I can challenge them on it. If we are successful in what we are doing, why should we change that? So, I've got a bit of leeway to make my own decisions in PE. It's a good position to be in, but I'm sure it would change if our GCSE results started to slip. I wouldn't be able to knock things back as easily then". (Liam, Oakside)

Liam similarly pointed out that the performance of the PE department had not gone unnoticed by Ofsted. For example, he suggested that pupils' examination results in GCSE PE meant that

Ofsted inspectors left him to his own devices. Other studies have similarly documented how successful departments "can go their own way with respect to policy, picking and choosing the extent to which they get involved" (Perryman *et al*., 2011, p. 190; Hardy, 2014; Ball, 2016; Tan, 2017). Liam explained:

> "Ofsted tell us what they expect from us. But I know for a fact that they wouldn't ask me to change what I'm currently doing. It must be working because our GCSE results are some of the best in the region. They've not gone unnoticed either. I don't have any issues with Ofsted. They just leave me to my own devices. I think other schools would though. The ones who don't get good grades in GCSE PE". (Liam, Oakside)

In contrast to Liam, other PE teachers at the school felt that they were less involved in policy decisions in PE. Charlene, Andrew, and Paul explained that they felt frustrated by what they saw as top-down decisions made by Liam and the senior leadership team, particularly as they were the ones "at the sharp end of policy delivery" (Maguire *et al*., 2015, p. 496). This perception left Charlene, Andrew, and Paul feeling separate and distant from decisions about the enactment of setting policy in PE. Andrew's comments were typical of many. He put it very simply:

> "We don't have a say really. We're not involved in decisions about setting. We just get told what to do. There are a few things I don't agree with, like setting kids as soon as they walk through the door. There isn't that much movement between the sets either. I just get on with it though. We don't even set the Year 7s on their PE ability. It's their academic ability. I'm pretty sure it's based on the data we receive from their primary school teachers. I can't do anything about it. I'm not sure if it's [Liam's] decision or the senior leadership teams. It's certainly not mine". (Andrew, Oakside)

Somewhat paradoxically, Andrew later explained that he enacted within-class ability grouping to help mitigate the problems of setting pupils on their academic abilities in Year 7 PE. In this regard, although Andrew was not "deeply invested in the policy process" (Maguire *et al*., 2015, p. 494), he was still able to exercise agency and take some control in his teaching. This is evident in the following comments. Andrew's comments lend support to Maguire *et al*.'s (2015, p. 487) contention that "there may be dominant or official enactments co-existing with informal, less visible and undocumented policy practices". He remarked:

> "It's not official policy, but a few of us put the Year 7s into groups within the sets. It's a judgement call. So, it means we can group them on their PE ability within lessons, even if we are not able to do it at the level of setting. It's a bit more flexible that way. We can move them around as much as we like. I'm not sure what [Liam] thinks about us grouping them. I'm not even sure he knows. It works better for us". (Andrew, Oakside)

Charlene also used her professional judgement to refine the policy of setting in Year 7 PE. She was firmly against the policy of setting pupils solely on their academic ability in PE. Charlene expressed the view, however, that the onus was on her to make this aspect of the policy work. The use of within-class ability grouping was again crucial in this respect. Charlene's comments lend support to the view that teachers' resistance to policy is not necessarily overt but may also be more indirect and subtle (Hardy, 2014, 2015; MacLean *et al*., 2015). She pointed out:

> "I'm not sure why we say we set them in Year 7. They are grouped on their academic ability. They might as well be in mixed-ability groups when we get them. I'd rather we did our own tests with them. A few of us asked [Liam], but were told that we weren't allowed. I'm not sure why. So, a few of us put them in groups within lessons to try and reduce the spread of ability. It's a bit subtler that way". (Charlene, Oakside)

Charlene also took care to avoid using labels of ability to refer to differences between pupils in PE. According to Charlene, this was department policy. She explained that sets were not explicitly named to avoid potential negative impacts on pupils' self-esteem. When pressed on this issue, Charlene said:

> "I've certainly never used top, middle and bottom in front of children. It's department policy that we don't make students aware of their set position. So, if I heard another member of the department using those terms, I would have to tell them not to. That's not the idea of it. It's that we have a group that works well together. If the kids were asking me what ability group [set] they were in I would come up with an answer that didn't refer to them as the bottom set. It's not good for their self-esteem". (Charlene, Oakside)

Amy held a slightly different perspective on the policy of setting in PE. Amy was unique in that she had only been teaching at Oakside for one year. Initially, Amy's perspective appeared typical of most of the PE teachers in the department. For example, Amy adopted a critical stance in relation to the enactment of the policy. She articulated the belief that setting in PE should be delayed until Year 8 to avoid labelling pupils at the outset of secondary school. Amy was clear that, although she could express agency in the way she enacted policy in school, she felt obliged to comply with the policy requirements of the senior leadership team. Amy's policy compliance was rooted in fears about career progression and development. She also suggested that she was uncomfortable with expressing resistance because she was a newly-appointed PE teacher in the school. Amy therefore felt that it was important to act in accordance with the policy directives of the senior leadership team to safeguard her reputation in the school. She commented:

> "I'm not a firm believer in some of the things we do in PE. For example, I'm not keen on the idea of putting students into groups as soon as we get them in Year 7. From what I read last year, labelling is a big thing and I'm not sure that students can handle that when they first come to us. But I've only been here for just over a year and I can't be going around challenging the senior leadership teams' decisions. If I want to progress here, I need to toe the line. I have a responsibility to do as I'm told". (Amy, Oakside)

Amy's comments are similar to those of beginning teachers in other studies of policy enactment (Ball *et al*., 2011b; Pinto, 2015; Maguire *et al*., 2015). In these studies, beginning teachers "did not enact policy, they followed what they were told and hoped to survive to teach another day" (Maguire *et al*., 2015, p. 496). For the most part, this was because job demands, such as long working hours and significant workload pressures, resulted in a lack of time and space for dissent and critical reflection (Pinto, 2015; Maguire *et al*., 2015). In slight contrast, however, as I explained in Chapter Five, Amy's recent experiences in post-graduate education had afforded her opportunities to critically reflect on the policy of setting in PE. Nonetheless, Amy felt silenced and forced to comply with the policy directives of the senior leadership team. Amy explained this succinctly as follows:

> "I could probably speak up, voice my opinion, and perhaps do things differently, but I just get my head down and do what I need to do to get by. It's all part of the job". (Amy, Oakside)

Liam, Andrew, Charlene, and Amy's comments highlight the ways in which power and positionality play out in how teachers translate and enact policy (Ball *et al*., 2012a; Maguire *et al*., 2015). As Löfgren *et al*. (2018, p. 5) explain, "not all policy actors work with policy in the same way and with the same degree of agency, and they are not all equal". It was clear that the more experienced PE teachers at Oakside had more agency in the enactment of setting policy

than the less experienced PE teacher. For example, Andrew and Charlene were able to use their agency to enact within-class ability grouping in PE. In contrast, Amy explained that her position as a newly-appointed PE teacher negated her ability to exercise agency and resistance. It was not the case that Amy was merely "subject to policy without options to act" (Löfgren *et al*., 2018, p. 17). Amy acknowledged that she could perhaps do things differently, but she chose not to because her prime concern was to be seen to be compliant be the senior leadership team. Maguire *et al*. (2015, p. 496) similarly documented how some teachers are "typically much less invested in policy enactment in the wider school setting as their concerns are driven by their level of experience, their position, and their engagement with their classrooms and students on a day-to-day basis".

A common view held by Liam and Dawn was that setting was a fluid policy framework. For example, they suggested that time had important implications for the ways in which setting was enacted in PE in the school. According to Liam and Dawn, the enactment of setting was more relaxed with pupils in Year 7. This reflected the fact that the PE department was less influenced by the pressures of accountability in this year group. Liam explained that pupils were allocated to sets in Year 7 based on one-off observations of their physical ability. This finding echoes the work of Croston (2014), who found PE teachers using early and short assessments to make setting decisions in Year 7 PE. Liam commented:

> "I have a basic system that I use when students come up for their transition day in Year 6. I do some performance activities with them to get a very rough idea of their physical ability and which set they should be in. I literally just sit and watch them, and it comes down to my professional judgement. It's not an exact science. It's a one-off observation over the course of an afternoon. [Dawn] does the same with the girls. We probably get

away with it because we don't have the same results pressures in Year 7". (Liam, Oakside)

Liam's comments highlight a disparity between PE teachers' perceptions of setting in Year 7 PE at Oakside. Andrew and Charlene were firm in their belief that Year 7 pupils were set on their academic ability rather than their physical ability in PE. Such discrepant views were related to Andrew and Charlene's lack of involvement in setting decisions in Year 7 PE. This notion was highlighted by Andrew:

"I know [Liam] sees the Year 6s on their transition day. The rest of us tend to be teaching so we don't get the chance to see them. I'm not sure what [Liam] does with them. I think he does some initial observations, but I couldn't tell you what he observes. I'm pretty sure [Liam] uses Key Stage 2 transfer information though, but this doesn't relate to PE. It's all about previous attainment in maths, English and science. You get some kids who are really good academically, but they aren't very good at PE". (Andrew, Oakside)

It was clear that the enactment of setting was a "process and not a one-off event" (Maguire *et al*., 2015, p. 487). That is, setting was not 'done' at one point in time in PE (Evans & Davies, 2012; Ball *et al*., 2012a; Maguire *et al*., 2015). Instead, differences in enactment occurred over time with different year groups in PE. For example, the enactment of setting was stronger with pupils in Year 8 onwards in PE. This finding resonates with Maguire *et al*.'s (2015, p. 487) assertion that "enactment is about policy realisation, but unlike much policy rhetoric, schools are real-time places where teachers pay different kinds of attention to policies at different times of the year" – (and, I would add, in different year groups). At this juncture, Liam and Dawn explained that they faced increasing pressures to raise standards in PE. According to Dawn, this was because some pupils started taking GCSE PE in Year 9. She explained:

> "We kind of change our practices in Year 8. We start to think a bit more strategically with setting. We're under a bit more pressure to think about standards in Year 8. GCSE PE starts in Year 9. So, we really think about who we have in different sets. It's definitely a bit more rigorous than it is with the Year 7s". (Dawn, Oakside).

This shift in emphasis led to a marked change in how Dawn and Liam viewed the abilities of some pupils in PE. Dawn and Liam noted that academic ability became more prominent in their setting decisions with proximity to GCSE PE. This prompted a reassessment of pupils' set placements in Year 8 PE. It was thus apparent that external assessment was driving notions of ability in PE. There was recognition of the need for a more nuanced notion of ability in Year 8 PE – one that included pupils' academic and physical abilities – because the GCSE examination consisted of practical and academic components. This contrasts with previous findings where PE teachers' conceptions of ability have been limited to physical ability (Hunter, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2005; Hay, 2005; Hay & Macdonald 2010a, 2010b; Croston, 2013). The references to pupils' academic ability was not initially prominent in Dawn and Liam's setting decisions in Year 7 PE. The following comments illustrate these points:

> "In the past, we have looked to recruit the sporty ones for GCSE PE. 60% of the mark was for physical ability. But things have changed with the new syllabus coming out. It's now only 40% practically marked. I know [Liam's] not keen, but we now look to recruit some of the academic students for GCSE PE. We need good grades. So, we enquire about how they are performing in science and English. It gives us an indication of how they might perform in GCSE PE. We sometimes find that these students are in the bottom set because we initially looked at them physically. So, we need to move them up to the top set. We do this at the end of Year 7". (Dawn, Oakside)

The PE department used two methods to determine the allocation of pupils to sets in Year 8. First, they enquired about pupils' performance in other curricular areas, especially science and English. This performance was taken as an initial indication of pupils' potential to achieve in the theoretical components of GCSE PE. In this regard, ability was thought to operate across subject boundaries. Second, they assessed pupils' abilities against the National Curriculum level descriptions. Notably, this was despite the DfE (2015, p.2) removing these levels to "allow teachers greater flexibility in the way that they plan and assess pupils' learning". Liam reported that the PE department continued to use the National Curriculum level descriptions because he had not had time to develop an alternative strategy. The levels are a set of eight "broad bands" (Gipps, 2005, p. 96) that are used to identify a pupil's progress against others of the same age. As the DfES (1999, p. 42) explain, "each level description describes the type and range of performance that pupils working at that level should characteristically demonstrate". Hence, the National Curriculum level descriptions are embedded in "developmental discourses" (McEvilly, 2012, p. 9). Dawn and Liam drew on these discourses in discussing their assessment practices in Year 8 PE. For example, Dawn suggested that the National Curriculum level descriptions allowed her to compare what Year 8 pupils were currently able to do with what they should be able to do in PE. Dawn's comments demonstrate how developmental discourses promote "normative understandings" (McEvilly, 2012, p. 149) of pupils' abilities in PE. She explained:

> "We still use the National Curriculum levels to allocate students to groups in Year 8. We use them as benchmarks to compare what pupils are currently able to do with what they should be able to do in Year 8. So, we can literally see what a Level 8 student should look like. The skills, knowledge and understanding they should have at their age. The higher their level, the more chance they will be in the top set in PE". (Dawn, Oakside)

Dawn also suggested that the PE department had to start taking setting more seriously in Year 8 PE. She explained that this involved using more accurate measures of ability, reassigning pupils to sets, and targeting pupils for GCSE PE. Dawn pointed out that the PE department used baseline assessments, including measures of agility, balance, coordination, speed, and strength, to provide more accurate information about pupils' ability levels in Year 8 PE. The focus of these assessments served to privilege motor skills as the essence of ability in PE. It is worth considering, therefore, that the use of alternative or broader measures of ability may have resulted in more or different pupils being in the top set in PE at Oakside. Dawn commented:

> "Me and [Liam] review the groups at the end of Year 7 to select which students should be in the high, middle or low set in Year 8. So, there's a bit of movement here. This is mainly based on their attainment levels in Year 7. We do some baseline assessments with students to get an overall picture of their abilities. This allows us to group students with a bit more accuracy. GCSE PE starts in Year 9 here, so we need to get it right. We are under pressure to get good GCSE results, so we need to start taking things more seriously and look at those who would make good GCSE students. We need to make sure they are in the top set, so we can prepare them early for their GCSE exams". (Dawn, Oakside)

PE teachers at Oakside stressed that flexibility was important in relation to the enactment of setting in PE. For example, Liam emphasised the importance of reviewing set placements periodically to account for pupils' differential learning rates and progress in PE. He explained:

> "Students learn and make progress at different speeds. So, it's important that they can move up and down groups throughout the year. We meet several times to discuss students' progress. So, just because they started the year in one group doesn't mean they will finish the year in the same group". (Liam, Oakside)

Liam acknowledged, however, that, in practice, there was little movement between sets in PE, indicating that only a few pupils moved in any one year. It was also noted earlier that most of this movement occurred at the end of Year 7. Liam was keen to stress that this was not through want of trying. Instead, he noted that practical constraints, such as limitations of time and available physical space, militated against his ability to move pupils on a regular basis. Similar constraints have been identified in research in classroom-based settings (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Davies *et al*., 2003; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Marks, 2012). For example, Liam explained that the middle and bottom sets were made much smaller than the top set because they were harder to teach. This approach made it difficult to move pupils into the top set because there was no space available. Liam recounted:

> "To be honest, I haven't changed anyone this year. Last year, I think I only changed a few. That's not unusual. It's probably the same across the board. So, it's only ever minor alterations here and there. It's not through want of trying though. Things just get in the way. One of the biggest barriers is administration. It's a bit of a clart on getting names transferred on electronic registers. I just haven't got the time to do it. Another barrier to the amount of movement we can make is the size of the top set. They're a really big group and I don't think we can fit anyone else in there. It's an issue". (Liam, Oakside)

A similar position was held by Dawn. She noted that movement between sets in PE was rare and difficult to achieve in practice. Dawn spoke explicitly about the difficulties of moving pupils up sets in PE. She suggested that upward set movement was virtually impossible after the first two years of schooling because pupils in the top set started to follow the GCSE PE syllabus. This meant that pupils in the bottom and middle sets increasingly missed out on work required for the top set. Dawn thus pointed out that gaps in the work covered by pupils in the bottom and middle sets constrained the possibility of moving them into the top set in PE. Dawn

did not mention if pupils could move from the bottom set to the middle set at this stage. These views are exemplified in the following comment:

> "We've gone to a Key Stage 4 start in Year 9. So, our top set Year 9s are doing GCSE PE. We start them a year earlier so that we have got more time with them. We have them all together in one group and they're working at a higher level all the time. It's the results driven business we're in. It's not without its problems though. It's virtually impossible to move students up into the top set. I mean I could move students into the top set, but the students in the bottom and middle set have already missed out on so much of the GCSE syllabus. They wouldn't be able to cope if they were moved into the top set. So, we tend to avoid doing it". (Dawn, Oakside)

PE teachers at Oakside indicated that pupils did not move sets except in relation to behaviour and levels of effort in PE. It is important to note, however, that they tended to associate behaviour and levels of effort with changes in ability and attainment. In this respect, there was implicit evidence that ability and attainment were being used as criteria for set transition by PE teachers. This point is typified by the following comment:

> "I'm pretty sure we only ever move them on their behaviour and effort. I don't think we really look at their ability. To be honest, I don't think I've moved anyone on ability this year. It's been more about their behaviour than their ability. Well, I suppose you might expect someone who is badly behaved or not putting in the effort to be less able. Now, I'm not saying that's always the case, but sometimes you get students who just go through the motions and they don't do as well as they did when we first set them". (Paul, Oakside)

Most of the PE teachers at Oakside framed behaviour and effort in negative terms. They tended to use various terms, including disruptive behaviour and poor effort, to justify individual movements. Accordingly, there was consensus that most movement was from the top down.

For example, Charlene and Paul explained that disruptive pupils were often punished by being withdrawn from the top set and moved to a lower set. These moves were used to enhance the teaching and learning of pupils in the top set. As Paul explained:

> "It [bad behaviour] can have a negative impact on the progress of other students in the group. We need to protect our top set students. If we ignore bad behaviour our top set students wouldn't be making the progress they are now. So, sometimes we move students out of the top set for behaviour reasons. I'm a bit dubious about this though. It doesn't get rid of the problem. It just shifts it elsewhere. It means that the middle and low ability students have their learning disrupted instead. I suppose you might say we're playing the game. We're judged on our top set students. We need to prioritise them". (Paul, Oakside)

Paul's comments, like those of Karen at Burnway, highlight the impact of performativity on the ways in which he enacted the policy of setting in PE. Paul's main concern was to protect the top set pupils from distraction in PE. Pupils who threatened their learning were therefore moved to a lower set in PE. This strategy was used to raise the performance levels of pupils in the top set in PE. Paul acknowledged the negative impacts of this practice on pupils moving down and those in the middle and bottom sets in PE. He felt, however, that he had to prioritise the needs of top set pupils because he was judged by their achievement levels in PE.

Sandwest

PE teachers at Sandwest felt that they had little control over how they translated and enacted policy in PE. For example, James, Sandwest's PE HoD, explained that policy decisions were made by the senior leadership team and were mandatory and non-negotiable. According to James, this was due to two factors: first, the results of a recent Ofsted inspection of the school;

and, second, the GCSE results of the school. At the time of the study, Sandwest had been graded as requires improvement by Ofsted, had a history of poor GCSE attainment, and had a declining roll of just under 450 pupils. James noted that these factors had led the school to relinquish some of their established practices, including mixed-ability grouping. Gewirtz *et al*. (1993, p. 234) assert that where schools are "unsuccessful in market terms, the potential for resistance is lowest and market-induced ethical dilemmas are therefore most pronounced". The data revealed that Sandwest faced a situation where it had little choice but to change its practices to improve its market position. James pointed out:

> "I used to be able to make my own decisions, but they've been taken out of my hands. We've just had a poor Ofsted inspection and although our results have improved, they haven't really improved enough. So, we're all on high alert. I was at a meeting with the senior leadership team a few weeks ago, and they are worried. They mentioned that we might be moving away from mixed-ability grouping in the school. So, all subjects will have to use setting. We already use setting, so we are fine. But we will have to do what we're told until things change. We need a consistent approach in the school". (James, Sandwest)

A similar view was expressed by Susan. Susan acknowledged that the recent Ofsted inspection report was a limiting factor in terms of the enactment of policy in PE. For example, she explained that the results of the inspection had made the PE department more visible to the senior leadership team. This was reflected in the senior leadership team using their "authoritative gaze" (Danaher *et al*., 2007, p. 54) to ensure that PE teachers were conforming to their policy guidelines. Susan was aware that her failure to follow such guidelines would have potentially severe consequences if recognised by the senior leadership team. She indicated, therefore, that she had no choice other than to follow the policy guidelines of the senior leadership team. From a Foucauldian perspective, systems of surveillance were key

instruments of power at Sandwest (Foucault, 1972, 1979, 1990, 1991c). In the following excerpt, Susan describes how she experienced policy in PE. Her comments included:

> "Everything's changed with the Ofsted report. We're under the microscope. We used to be able to do what we thought was best for our students, but now every little thing goes through the senior leadership team. So, the senior leadership team pretty much tell us what we can and can't do. They check up on us as well. I was observed by one of the senior leadership team only a few weeks ago. They told me that it was just a general check on my teaching, but they've never observed me before. I think it was just an excuse to see if I was following their guidance. I don't really have a choice". (Susan, Sandwest)

PE teachers at Sandwest frequently drew on dominant discourses of ability to justify their approach to setting in PE. In doing so, they positioned assessment as an important basis for allocating pupils to sets. These included motor skill and fitness tests. These tests were understood to provide an objective and accurate measure of pupils' ability in PE. James and Charlotte, for example, highlighted the interplay between essentialist discourses of ability and their assessment approaches in PE. The following quotes highlight the importance placed by James and Charlotte on assessment data as an indicator for ability in PE. They reported:

> "You can definitely measure someone's ability. We use baseline assessments in PE. The senior leadership team are happy for us to continue to do this. It's like a round robin of generic tasks. In the first half-term we run a series of fitness tests with our Year 7s to measure their muscular endurance, speed and coordination. We also test their throwing, running and catching. It gives you an overall picture of their ability. It's an accurate measure because we're not subjectively assessing them. The senior leadership team

would have a problem with us if we were doing this. We put them into sets based on this assessment information". (James, Sandwest)

"We use a range of tests to measure ability in PE. So, just baseline tests really. It means that we can allocate students to groups more accurately than if we were to observe them ourselves. The senior leadership team are keen for us to use objective measures too". (Charlotte, Sandwest)

The assessment practices of PE teachers at Sandwest were thus tied to performance measures in PE. This led them to focus on pupils' physical abilities in their setting decisions. It was apparent, however, that decisions on the allocation of pupils to sets were contingent on a range of other factors, including behaviour, motivation, effort, and friendship. In this regard, although 'setting' implied that teachers at Sandwest were using ability as the basis for allocating pupils to sets in PE, ability was not the only basis for setting decisions. This finding raises concern over the potential for pupils to be misplaced in sets in PE. For example, previous research has shown that when teachers allocate pupils to sets on factors other than ability, this can lead to inappropriate set placement for some (Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Davies *et al*., 2003; Hallam & Ireson, 2006; Muijs & Dunne, 2010; Marks, 2012). The influence of these factors on set allocation was described by Matthew. Matthew's comments highlight the influence of discourses of standards on his setting practices in PE. For example, he suggested that he needed to get the composition of the sets right to allow pupils to make more progress in PE. He commented:

"We like to say we set on ability, but when it comes down to it we set on loads of different things. It's a lot more complex. It's about thinking who is in that group, will they get on, and are they going to do well. If we get the dynamics right, they should work better as a

group and make more progress. That's the key for us really. So, it's not just about ability in PE. It's about behaviour, motivation, effort, friendship". (Matthew, Sandwest)

In contrast to Burnway and Oakside, assessments were more frequent at Sandwest, and PE teachers suggested that pupils could move up or down sets at any point during the year. PE teachers pointed out, however, that the amount of movement varied between different sets in PE. James and Susan explained that movement to lower sets, particularly based on decisions about ability, was limited because of its potential negative impact on pupils' self-esteem and levels of motivation. Consequently, they noted that there was a tendency for pupils to be moved to lower sets for social or behavioural reasons in PE. James and Susan also mentioned that the chance of moving up or down sets incentivised pupils to modify their social and academic behaviour in PE. Following the ideas of Foucault (1972, 1979, 1990) and Gore (1995), PE teachers were attempting to use setting as a disciplinary device to encourage pupils to self-regulate their behaviour. These points are well illustrated in the following comments:

"It's not something we just do at the start of the year. We review the sets continuously. Assessments are ongoing, and students have the chance to move in to the lower or higher set at any point during the year. I do think it's difficult to move someone from the higher to the lower set though. It's hard to find a nice way to move them down. It can negatively impact their self-esteem and motivation. We're keen to avoid this. So, we tend to limit movement to the lower set. If we do move students, this is for friendship or behaviour issues. I think it has less of an impact if they are moved for bad behaviour than for ability. You can change your behaviour easily" (James, Sandwest)

"We use it [movement between sets] as a carrot and a stick. If their behaviour becomes a problem, we sometimes threaten to move them down from one set to another. If we do

move them, the option is there for them to come back up. It's a behaviour management tool to engage them and make them realise they should be performing better. They don't want to be moved because then they would be away from their friends. It also works the other way. If the students in the bottom set know we'll move them if they work hard and behave, they'll do exactly that. It's an incentive for some students. It can be a little boost of confidence and can help raise attainment in the bottom set". (Susan, Sandwest)

Although James and Susan suggested that ongoing assessment provided opportunities for inter-set movement throughout the school year, the nature of this enactment was influenced by practical limitations. Like PE teachers at Oakside and Burnway, James and Susan reported difficulties in moving pupils between sets. For example, James and Susan asserted that the number and size of sets reduced the amount of flexibility in the setting system in PE. Responses like the following typified this idea:

"We're sometimes very limited because we've only got two classes on at once. I mean it would just be a quick conversation between the two teachers if we wanted to change groups around. But you've got to maintain relatively equal sized groups, or you might have one group of 40 and another group of 20. There isn't a cap on the number of students we can have in either set, but there's only so much shifting around you can do". (James, Sandwest)

James and Susan also noted that movement was often met with resistance from pupils. This was because pupils tended to form friendships within their sets. In this sense, once sets were established, James and Susan explained that they were often reluctant to unsettle pupils by moving them away from their friends. James and Susan managed the social disadvantages of setting by using within-class ability grouping in PE. They suggested that they enacted within-

class ability grouping to move pupils between groups in a less formal, less structured way in PE. This was explained in the following terms:

> "One of the biggest barriers [to movement] is the students themselves. I think setting creates a culture where students become happy and comfortable in the group they are in because they are with their friends. So, not many of them want to move. To give you an example, some lower ability students had the option to move up to the top set this year, but they didn't want to. They point blank refused to move. At the same time, students don't want to be seen to be moved down. If some of our top set boys were told they were going to moved down, they would be devastated and infuriated. So, we almost end up splitting sets into mini groups and move students that way. It's a bit safer as we can move students without them realising". (Susan, Sandwest)

There was evidence that movement between sets was further limited by PE teachers' assumptions of ability and assessment. As in the study by Croston (2014), there was a shared belief among PE teachers at Sandwest that pupils' ability levels did not change a great deal in PE. At the same time, PE teachers at Sandwest placed a high degree of faith in the use of assessment instruments as determinants of pupils' set placements in PE. The results of such instruments were unquestionably accepted as reliable and accurate measures of pupils' ability in PE. Hence, most PE teachers at Sandwest indicated that once initial assessments had been completed, their perceptions of pupils' abilities were unlikely to change. In doing so, they perpetuated an essentialist discourse of fixed-ability, as the following remarks illustrate:

> "I don't think my opinion would ever really change. I just think it's down to their natural ability if I'm being honest. The assessments we use are accurate and rigorous. So, we can be confident that we have got placements right. So, although we do have the opportunities

to move pupils between sets, it isn't for changes in ability. It's usually more to do with changes in behaviour, attitude or social reasons". (Matthew, Sandwest)

While Matthew argued that PE assessments were accurate and rigorous, their breadth and focus were notably narrow. PE teachers at Sandwest were using the same baseline assessments as those at Oakside and, in doing so, focussed exclusively on pupils' motor skills. This focus skewed who was recognised as able or not in PE. As Hay and Penney (2013, p. 76) point out, assessments are "value laden" and, by definition, destined to privilege some abilities over others. This is evident in the following remarks:

"It's baseline assessments. How fast they can run, how far they can throw etc. Obviously, we set them on different things, but the students who have good motor skills will probably be nearer the top set than those who don't". (Matthew, Sandwest).

PE teachers at Sandwest reported that they were careful in not using ability labels in the presence of pupils. This practice was at odds with their responses in interviews, where they frequently and explicitly referred to pupils in the top set or bottom set in PE. Nonetheless, they explained that sets were referred to as colours in PE. For example, the top set boys were described as the red group and the bottom set boys as the green group. The sets were originally referred to as the performance group and the individual group. James posited that the red group and the green group were more neutral terms that carried no implicit assumptions about ability. He pointed out:

"We don't refer to the students as the top or the bottom set. I think this would irresponsible. Recently, we've started to refer to them as colours. I took the idea to the senior leadership team and they were happy for us to do it in this way. I mean one of the

> biggest problems with setting is labelling. So, if a student finds out that they're in the bottom set they will probably be stigmatised. Colours are more neutral. If we refer to sets as the red or green group students won't know if they are in the top or bottom set in PE". (James, Sandwest)

This was a recent innovation designed to avoid the labelling and stigmatising effects of setting. It was also an innovation that came directly from the PE department. In this regard, there was evidence that PE teachers were able to exercise their professional agency in the policy process at Sandwest. This finding adds weight to the suggestion that teachers are both subjects of policy and policy actors (Ball *et al*., 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Maguire *et al*., 2015; Löfgren *et al*., 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that the policy of setting was enacted differently by PE teachers at Burnway, Oakside, and Sandwest. At Sandwest, setting was a whole-school concern, with direct guidance from the senior leadership team on how it should be enacted in PE, and a great deal of consistency in approach across different year groups. In comparison, at Burnway, there was very little input from the senior leadership team, with more evidence of setting decisions being influenced by PE teachers' values and pedagogical beliefs, and more variation in approach across different year groups in PE. Oakside was something of a middle ground between Sandwest and Burnway. For example, at Oakside, there was direct guidance from the senior leadership team on how setting should be enacted in PE, however, policy enactment "on the ground" (Braun *et al*., 2011a, p. 585) tended to be influenced by the values and pedagogical beliefs of Liam, the PE HoD. There was also variation in the enactment of setting policy across different year groups in PE at Oakside.

The data from this study indicates that contextual factors are significant in policy enactment in PE. As Ball *et al*. (2012, p. 40) remark, "context is a mediating factor in the policy enactment work done in schools – and it is unique to each school, however similar they may initially seem to be". As I noted in Chapter Four, Braun *et al*. (2011b) and Ball *et al*. (2012) identified a range of situated, material, and external factors that may result in differences in the enactment of policy between schools. In this study, these factors variously generated both constraints and possibilities for PE teachers in enacting the policy of setting. For example, at Oakside, the PE department had "earned autonomy" (Ball *et al*., 2012b, p. 39) through the successful examination results of their pupils. This meant that Liam, Oakside's PE HoD, was in a powerful position to resist some of the pressures and expectations from the senior leadership team, Ofsted, and the LEA. At Burnway, PE teachers noted that the location of the PE department in the school meant that their practices were less visible to the senior leadership team. They felt, therefore, that they were able to enact policy in "original and creative ways" (Ball *et al*., 2012b, p. 3) in PE. In contrast, at Sandwest, the PE department struggled to achieve successful examination results, and consequently felt the "punitive and auditorial side" (Ball *et al*., 2012b, p. 39) of external agencies, including Ofsted and the LEA. In this regard, PE teachers at Sandwest felt that they had little autonomy to make decisions about policy in PE (Braun *et al*., 2011b; Ball *et al*., 2012b). These findings are similar to those of Ball *et al*. (2012), whose research revealed that subject departments performing well in national examinations had "considerably more freedom to decide which policy initiatives to get involved with and to what extent" (p. 30) than those that were not.

One of the key findings was that some PE teachers felt constrained in their ability to translate and enact policies in PE. Notwithstanding this, the data revealed that PE teachers were not merely "technicians carrying out prescribed policy" (MacLean *et al*., 2015, p. 82). Instead, most took an active and creative role in translating and enacting aspects of policy in PE. For example, at Oakside, Liam suggested that his positional power and the reputation of the PE department allowed him to make his own decisions on policy in the school. This left other teachers in the department feeling frustrated by what they perceived as their lack of involvement in policy decisions in PE. It was clear, however, that they were enacting their agency to adapt the policy directives of the senior leadership team. For example, Andrew and Charlene did not agree with the schools' policy of setting pupils on their academic ability in Year 7 PE. In this regard, they enacted within-class ability grouping to reduce the spread of ability in what they believed were mixed-ability groups in PE. Similar processes were also in evidence at Sandwest and Burnway. At Sandwest, PE teachers used colours to refer to PE sets. This was not school policy but marked an attempt to negate some of the stigmatising effects of setting pupils in PE. Some PE teachers were playing "active policy roles" (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017, p. 690) by modifying the policy of setting to fit with their beliefs about teaching and learning.

The ability of PE teachers to exercise their power and agency appeared to relate to their status and experience in the school. Foucault (1978, 1979, 1980b) believed that power is embedded in all human relations, and argued that power is interwoven throughout institutions, creating potential for localised points of resistance (Paechter, 2006; Danaher *et al*., 2007; Taylor, 2010; Williams, 2017). In this research, a Foucauldian analysis of power would suggest that PE teachers were "active (albeit unequal) participants in a power relation" (Avner *et al*., 2014, p. 44). For example, Andrew and Charlene were able to use their agency, as a factor of experience,

to enact within-class ability grouping in PE. Andrew and Charlene's resistance was not necessarily overt or outright because they were adapting the policy of setting without others knowing they were doing so. In contrast, the younger, less experienced PE teachers in the study appeared to be less influential in the process of enacting policy in PE. This point is exemplified in comments from Thomas at Burnway and Amy at Oakside. For Thomas and Amy there was an acceptance of the need to follow the policy directives of the senior leadership team and the PE HoD because they were newly-appointed teachers in their schools. Thomas and Amy recognised that they could exercise agency by making choices in the way they enacted policy in PE, but they felt uncomfortable about doing so because of fears about career progression.

The data in this chapter suggested that neoliberalism had consequences for how PE teachers constructed understandings of ability, particularly in examination PE. For the most part, PE teachers defined ability in corporeal terms in core PE, with emphasis on pupils' physical performance, body shape, and size. In contrast, PE teachers at Oakside indicated that the school's performative ideals and expectations brought about a sharper focus on pupils' academic ability in examination PE. PE teachers at Oakside also noted that the performance of the department was measured by their examination results and this led them to target pupils who were more capable of achieving A* to C grades in GCSE PE. This included those pupils who were good at science and English. PE teachers were less concerned about core PE because they were not measured by pupils' achievement in this aspect of PE. It was thus apparent that external performance indicators of educational success were driving notions of ability in PE, and that this led teachers to focus on measurable and accountable aspects of ability in PE.

It is important to note that in all three case study schools, PE teachers reported that there was very little movement between sets in PE. This was the result of the interaction of numerous factors, including PE teachers' conceptions of ability, the availability of space, and the structure of the curriculum. For example, most PE teachers tended to draw on dominant discourses of ability to justify a lack of movement between sets in PE. They were conceptualising ability as a relatively stable, measurable capacity and, as such, saw little need to move pupils between sets in PE, at least for reasons of ability. Other associated ability-based practices, such as the early targeting of GCSE pupils at Oakside, were also legitimated by fixed-ability beliefs. Decisions to move pupils between sets in PE were, for the most part, based on social and behavioural factors. Most PE teachers at Burnway, Oakside, and Sandwest highlighted the importance of removing disruptive pupils from the top set to protect the learning of those who would prospectively attain A* to C grades in GCSE PE. They also considered pupils' social relationships in their setting decisions, explaining that if pupils were in sets with their friends, they would be more likely to make more progress than if they were not. The preoccupation with progress and attainment highlights how the demands of performativity shaped how teachers were making setting decisions in PE.

The demands of performativity also had consequences for the subjectivities of PE teachers and the processes through which they struggled over and negotiated aspects of policy in PE. For example, at Sandwest, Susan reported that she felt forced by the senior leadership team, Ofsted, and the LEA to engage in potentially harmful practices, including setting, because they were likely to benefit the achievement levels of more able pupils in PE. This posed ethical challenges for Susan as she struggled to reconcile these practices with her values and beliefs about teaching and learning. Previous research has similarly highlighted how the demands of performativity shape and constrain the behaviours of teachers in schools (Powell, 2015;

Azzarito, 2016; Azzarito *et al*., 2017; Williams, 2017; Williams *et al*., 2018). The experiences of Susan and some of the other teachers in the sample also demonstrate how techniques of power operate in schools and produce governmental effects. In this case, the senior leadership team, Ofsted, and the LEA mobilised strategies of normalisation and surveillance, including the threat of removing funding for failing to hit targets and regular inspections, to ensure that PE teachers were raising standards in PE. This led PE teachers to regulate their actions and practices, including following guidance to use setting, to negotiate resources and achieve positive recognition for their department.

It is also important to acknowledge that some PE teachers in the case study schools suggested that the pressures of performativity were less intense in PE. This belief seemed to be based on the success and/or status of PE in the school. For example, PE teachers at Burnway explained that the senior leadership team were not concerned with PE because its examination results did not contribute to the academic performance of the school. Following Ball *et al*.'s (2012b, p. 515) observation, however, the data presented suggested that there "was no real escape from the expectations and necessities of performance". PE teachers made frequent reference to the importance of improving pupils' results on standardised tests and most expressed concerns about the consequences of poor performance in PE. Several strategies, including targeting pupils for GCSE and teaching GCSE PE in Year 9, were therefore used to maximise the attainment levels of pupils in PE. Again, these strategies were not necessarily of PE teachers' own choosing. For example, while some PE teachers, particularly those at Burnway, expressed the view that they could determine their own policies in PE, performative pressures left them feeling obliged to enact policies in certain ways. This included focussing attention, time, and resources on potential high attainers in PE.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that policy enactment is a complex and intricate process mediated by numerous internal and external contextual factors, including the ethos of the school, the status of PE in the school, and the interests of individual PE teachers and others in and outside of the school. These factors were unique to each school and led to differences in the enactment of the policy of setting in PE. The next chapter draws on the findings of this chapter to consider how the enactment of setting policy impacted on pupils and their subjectivities in PE in the three case study schools. The findings indicate that the enactment of setting policy impacted on pupils in a variety of ways, including broadening or narrowing their understandings of ability, and increasing or decreasing their motivation to engage in PE and other sport-related opportunities outside or PE. These impacts were mediated by the set placement of pupils, the amount of movement they experienced between sets, their educational and vocational aspirations, their gender, and the school's specialism.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE IMPACT OF THE ENACTMENT OF SETTING IN PE: PUPIL PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine how the enactment of the policy of setting impacts on pupils and their subjectivities in PE. It draws on data from fourteen focus group interviews with 63 (33 female and 30 male) Year 9 pupils in three case study schools. As I explained in Chapter Four, most of the focus groups involved four or five pupils who were classified by PE teachers as belonging to either a top, middle, or bottom set in PE. These were also the terms that pupils used to describe themselves and others in PE. Accordingly, I use these terms to describe pupils in this chapter.

At Burnway, the girls were interviewed in two mixed-ability groups because they were grouped in this way for PE lessons. The data revealed that the girls at Burnway were also experiencing ability grouping within mixed-ability PE lessons. The chapter therefore considers the impact of the enactment of setting and within-class ability grouping across the ability range in PE. As Boaler *et al*. (2000) explain, many studies of setting have "focussed upon differences in group means, masking individual differences within groups" (p. 633). Although the literature has tended to conclude that top set pupils benefit from setting and bottom set pupils are harmed, this is never a straightforward process. In this chapter, I attend to the ways in which pupils were agentic in positioning themselves differently in relation to the discourses and practices around setting in the three case study schools. In doing so, my intention is to demonstrate that setting impacts on pupils in a variety of different ways in PE.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first examines the impact of the enactment of setting on pupils and their subjectivities in Year 9 PE. Chapter Six revealed that the policy of setting was enacted differently in the case study schools. Accordingly, following the pattern of the previous two chapters, I discuss each school separately to highlight how different enactments of setting impacted on pupils in PE. The last section provides a summary of the key findings.

Burnway

In exploring how the enactment of setting made them feel in PE, the boys at Burnway were generally positive. For example, the boys in the top set emphasised that setting contributed to their perception that they were high ability in PE. This made them feel confident and positive about themselves and other pupils in their set. They also noted that there were benefits to be gained from being in the top set in PE, including the opportunity to represent the school in inter-school competitions. Noah explained:

> "It makes me feel really good that the teachers think I'm high ability in PE. We get loads of benefits too. They let us miss lessons to compete against other schools. I played in a football tournament last week. It was great". (Noah, Top set, Burnway)

The data revealed that being in the top set was important for most of the boys at Burnway because they were constructing their subjectivities in relation to their aspirations and interests. Most of the boys in the top set at Burnway wanted to be PE teachers, sports coaches, or professional sportsmen when they left the school. They also indicated that they were all

participating in sport outside of school. Sadiq's comments were typical of those made by the boys in the top set at Burnway. He remarked:

> "PE is really important to me. I want to be a PE teacher in the future. So, I need to be in the top set. I'd be gutted if I wasn't". (Sadiq, Top set, Burnway)

In comparison to the boys in the top set, the importance and value of PE was considerably less for the boys in the bottom set at Burnway. Notably, the boys in the bottom set viewed PE as enjoyable and fulfilling but emphasised that the subject was not related to their vocational aspirations and subsequent career pursuits. They also held limited aspirations to continue to participate in 'sport' outside of PE. Instead, the boys in the bottom set at Burnway were attaching more importance to core subjects in the school. Ethan and Charlie, for example, had developed a positive sense of ability through being good at Mathematics, English, and science in the school. They were largely unconcerned about their perceived lack of ability in PE because they were constructing their subjectivities in relation to these subjects. In discussing how being in the bottom set in PE made them feel, the following comments were typical of the boys at Burnway:

> "I'm not bothered. There are other subjects that are more important to me. So, I focus more on those. It's important that I'm good at the core subjects. I excel in other subjects. So, I would be more bothered if I was in the bottom set in those. I think I would be traumatised. You get jobs based on those subjects. For most jobs you don't need PE". (Ethan, Bottom set, Burnway)

> "I suppose it doesn't matter how good I am at PE because I'm good at other subjects. So, if someone tells me that I'm bottom set in PE, I don't really care because I'm good at maths. I'm top in the core subjects. That's what matters to me. I don't want to do anything with PE when I leave school. So, it doesn't matter at all". (Charlie, Bottom set, Burnway)

The element of choice at Burnway was also a factor in the boys' lack of concern about being in the bottom set in PE. They felt that they had agency in selecting their set in PE and this led them to feel a sense of empowerment and responsibility. This notion was evident in the response from William. He explained:

> "We got to pick the sets ourselves. So, it was our choice really. We were sat in the sports hall and had to pick one of two sets. It was our decision". (William, Bottom set, Burnway)

Most of the boys in the top and bottom sets at Burnway suggested that they took the opportunity to select their set based on friendship. Only two boys in the top set mentioned ability or attainment as factors influencing their setting decisions in PE. This was despite PE teachers reporting that they could intervene if pupils selected a set that was not 'suitable' for them (see Chapter Six). Most of the boys at Burnway therefore perceived sets more as friendship groups than ability groups in PE. William and Ethan put it like this:

> "I don't really see them as ability groups. The teachers didn't put us in the groups. I picked my group to be with my friends. They are more about friendship than anything else. That's my opinion anyway". (William, Bottom set, Burnway)

> "It was a free choice, so we chose to go with our friends. My mates went into the bottom set, so I just followed them. I don't take PE seriously and just wanted to be with my mates. That's the most important thing for me. I enjoy PE more because I'm comfortable with the people I'm with". (Ethan, Bottom set, Burnway)

Most of the boys in the bottom set at Burnway explained that PE was an opportunity for them to interact with friends and have fun, rather than necessarily improve their ability. They also indicated that they did not feel stigmatised by the label of 'bottom set' because of their belief that set placements were not based on ability. Riley, for example, commented:

> "I think with us picking the sets, it means that you're less likely to be called names. You haven't been put there because you're bad at PE. It's your choice. We tend to just go with friends. So, I'm happy in my set because we just come to PE to enjoy it. We're not bothered about getting better. It doesn't matter if I'm the best at PE. It's just fun. It's a break from sitting at a table in other subjects". (Riley, Bottom set, Burnway)

It is important to note that not all the boys at Burnway felt that they were 'free' to determine their set placement in PE. The comments from the boys in the top set particularly showed that they were aware that PE teachers had impacted their setting decisions in PE. Several of the boys in the top set in PE at Burnway noted that PE teachers watched them closely and had words with them if they felt they had selected a set that was too low. As Lawrence explained:

> "We were told to choose the set we wanted to be in. So, we had the final say. But it wasn't that easy. They had words with some of my mates when they sat in the line for the bottom set. They told them to stop being stupid and to get to the top set. I thought they were going to be put on detention or something. It was a scary experience. They were watching us like hawks. I knew I couldn't get away with going in the line for the bottom set. Most of my mates ended up in the top set anyway. So, that's where I went". (Lawrence, Top set, Burnway)

Lawrence's perspective accords with the way PE teachers enacted the policy of setting in PE at Burnway (see Chapter Six). It also highlights the power relations at play in the ways in which sets were decided in PE in the school. Although Lawrence and most of the other boys at Burnway felt that they had the final say in decisions about the set they ended up in for PE lessons, PE teachers were utilising techniques of power (in this case, surveillance) to govern or regulate these decisions (Foucault, 1979, 1980a, 1980b; Gore, 1995). In Lawrence's case, he did not have free choice in his setting decision in PE. Instead, the fear of being observed or,

in Foucauldian terms, surveyed and disciplined, by PE teachers led him to regulate his decision and select the top set in PE.

The boys at Burnway perceived that it was possible to move between sets in PE and suggested three ways in which this might be brought about: first, by asking PE teachers; second, by involving parents; and, third, by putting in less or more effort in PE. Similar beliefs have been reported among primary and secondary school pupils in mathematics, English, and science lessons (Hallam *et al*., 2004b; Hallam & Ireson, 2007; Marks, 2012). When Oliver and Charlie were questioned about movement between sets in PE, they said:

> "I haven't moved set, but it definitely happens. It doesn't happen often though. I've seen a few of the lads from our set get dropped down. I don't know what it was for though. I think they just asked the teacher to move". (Oliver, Top set, Burnway)

> "Yeah, you can move. It's maybe only one or two though. You can put in more effort. One of the lads asked the teacher to move and he said no. So, he got his mam to ring the school. It must have worked. He's in the top set now". (Charlie, Bottom set, Burnway)

None of the boys that I interviewed at Burnway wanted to change sets in PE. Instead, reflecting the comments of PE teachers (see Chapter Six), they reported feeling happy and comfortable in their set because they were with their friends. Some of the boys at Burnway also indicated that they would exercise their agency and actively resist any attempt to move them into a different set in PE. They outlined a variety of strategies that they would use to resist being moved between sets in PE, including messing around, withdrawing effort, and simply refusing to move.

In contrast to the boys, most of the girls at Burnway had less of a sense of their own ability in PE. They were also largely unaware of the extent of the differences in ability between different girls in PE. These views were not related specifically to the absence of setting in PE. Instead, most of the girls at Burnway drew on gender-related discourses to make sense of their own and others' ability in PE. For example, most of the girls commented that they were not sure about their ability level in PE. This was explained with reference to the lack of ability differences between girls in PE. As Isla and Evie pointed out:

> "I think we're all pretty similar in PE. We don't really do much outside of school. So, I suppose it's harder to position yourself". (Isla, Mixed-ability, Burnway)

> "I'm not sure anyone really stands out in lessons. You might get a few who are good because they are in clubs outside of PE. The rest of us are just the same. Maybe that means we're average. I'm not really sure". (Evie, Mixed-ability, Burnway)

There were some exceptions to this view at Burnway. Amelia, Mia, and Grace developed a strong sense of their abilities in relation to other girls in PE. They also reported that grouping within lessons helped to shape their understanding of their ability level in PE. As Grace explained:

> "The teachers put us into groups in lessons. They tell us they are friendship groups, but I know they are grouping us on ability. There's a few of us who are really good at PE and we're always in the same group together. We work away from the rest of the girls, so we don't get distracted. They expect more from us in PE. The rest of the girls are in much bigger groups". (Grace, Mixed-ability, Burnway)

Grace's comments demonstrate that ability discourses can impact on pupils in lessons that are not "dominated by explicit grouping and labelling" (Marks, 2013, p. 36). In this case, although

perhaps subtler, Amelia, Mia, and Grace were receiving ability-related messages from grouping within mixed-ability PE lessons. They indicated that within-class ability grouping consolidated their perception that they were good at PE. Amelia, Mia, and Grace were also very aware of PE teachers' differential expectations of them. This is consistent with previous research in mathematics showing that within-class grouping can convey strong messages to pupils about their abilities (Marks, 2012, 2013, 2014). As Marks (2013) reminds us, ability is such a pervasive discourse that is continues to have an impact on teachers and pupils irrespective of organisational structures.

Oakside

The pupils' descriptions of their abilities in PE were complex and varied at Oakside. For example, as has been described in earlier research by Marks (2012), the pupils at Oakside took on their set label as a self-description, although there were some exceptions to this rule. The pupils at Oakside were also very aware of the meanings associated with different set labels in PE. For example, when asked to explain what being in different sets meant about them and others in PE, the following responses were typical:

> "Being in the top set means that we're better than everyone else. We're the role models. Everyone else looks up to us. The other two sets just mess on. They don't try. They just talk, and they don't focus. They don't care about PE like we do". (Josh, Top set, Oakside)

> "We're just average really. So, we're kind of like a mixed group. We're not amazing, but we're not terrible either. Bottom set are those who don't work hard, and top set are those who take PE seriously". (Sibka, Middle set, Oakside)

> "It means that I'm not very good at PE. That I'm not allowed to study GCSE [examination] PE. The top set is the sporty ones. The middle set are average. They put in effort but don't have that natural ability to be in the top set". (Mitchell, Bottom set, Oakside)

In these excepts, Josh, Sibka, and Mitchell construct their subjectivities in relation to their ability label in PE. The data suggested, however, that this was a contested process, with some instances of pupils at Oakside challenging and resisting their assigned ability labels in PE. This was particularly evident in the cases of Aimee and Ben. Notably, Aimee and Ben defined themselves as high ability, irrespective of the fact that they were in the middle and bottom sets in PE. In this regard, they experienced an inconsistency between their own perceptions of their ability and their PE teachers' perceptions of their ability. This was a major source of frustration for Aimee and Ben, as the following quotes demonstrate:

> "I'm not really fussed about PE, but I know I'm better than average ability. I like doing stuff outside of PE. So, I do loads of swimming and have won a few races. We don't get the chance to do swimming in PE though. I think they only really test us on team games. So, I'm not in the top set because I don't do netball. It's very annoying. If we were tested on swimming, I would be in the top set instead of others". (Aimee, Middle set, Oakside)

> "I'm in the bottom set, but I don't agree with it. I know I have ability. My coaches tell me as well. I'm good at climbing and fishing. I've won trophies. So, the things I'm good at we don't do in PE. It limits people to what abilities they can have. If somebody's good at something and the school doesn't offer it, they are just put in the bottom set. The top set is just based on rugby, football and cricket. It's not fair". (Ben, Bottom set, Oakside)

Aimee and Ben's comments highlight the variable and contextual nature of their ability-related subjectivities. As Barab and Plucker (2002, p. 173) point out, "ability does not emerge or exist

in a contextual vacuum" and, as such, the way that ability is conceptualised within and outside of PE will likely differ. Aimee and Ben were in the middle and bottom sets in PE. They believed, therefore, that PE teachers perceived them to be of limited ability in PE. This was in marked contrast to their ability-related subjectivities outside of PE. Here, Aimee's success in swimming and Ben's success in climbing and fishing led them to believe that they were more able than their set placement implied. In this regard, they challenged their position in the bottom set in PE by constructing themselves as being better than pupils in the top set at swimming, climbing, and fishing. In doing so, Aimee and Ben resisted sport discourses that positioned them as marginal and lacking ability in PE. Ben succinctly argued:

> "Just because I'm not good at team sports doesn't mean I'm not good. I'm good at other things. If PE was more about climbing and fishing, I would be in the top set. There'd be a total flip with the sets. The top set would be the bottom set". (Ben, Bottom set, Oakside)

Discourses of sport were significant to most pupils' understandings and perceptions of ability in PE at Oakside. It was common for pupils at Oakside to argue that their set placement reflected their ability in particular sports, most notably competitive team games. In doing so, as has been reported in other studies in PE (Hunter, 2004; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b; Croston, 2013, 2014), pupils at Oakside conceived of ability in PE as a physical capacity firmly linked to performance in particular activities of the curriculum. This was despite Liam and Dawn reporting that they set pupils based on both their physical and academic ability in Year 9 PE (see Chapter Six). The following comments from Dylan suggest that ability discourses and messages were being reinforced through the activities offered in the PE curriculum at Oakside (Wilkinson & Penney, 2016; Wilkinson *et al*., 2016). He remarked:

> "We do loads of sport in the school. So, it's all about how good you are at sport. Things like football and rugby. Competitive team games mostly. If you're good at these sports,

you'll be in the top set. You should be doing them outside of school as well. If you don't do sport seriously, you will be in the other sets". (Dylan, Middle set, Oakside)

Pupils at Oakside talked about the importance of PE to their future aspirations. This had a direct impact on how they felt about their set placement and, more generally, how they felt about their ability in PE. For example, some of the pupils in the top set at Oakside reported that PE was valuable to their educational and vocational futures. In this regard, they felt that it was imperative to be in the top set in PE. Kieran's comments were typical of those made by pupils in the top set at Oakside:

"It depends what career path you want to go down. I want a career in PE, so it's important that I'm in the top set. We are all studying GCSE PE in the top set". (Kieran, Top set, Oakside)

Not all the pupils in the top set wanted to pursue a career in PE and sport. They maintained, however, that they were relieved and happy to be in the top set. Joseph, for example, explained that being in the top set made him feel special and privileged. It also enabled him to develop a sense of superiority over pupils in the middle and bottom sets, as the following comments demonstrate:

"I don't want to do a job in PE. But I'm relieved I'm in the top set. It makes me feel good about myself. Like I've made it in PE. I feel a bit special and privileged. I think that's the right word. It also makes me feel like I'm better than everyone else. Well better than those in the other sets. I think we are similar in the top set". (Joseph, Top set, Oakside)

Pupils in the bottom set at Oakside expressed concern about their perceived lack of ability in PE. This was particularly so because of the status attached to PE in the school. Although pupils

in the bottom set felt that PE was of little consequence to their educational and vocational futures, they noted that it was particularly important to be able in PE in a specialist sport school. This was in marked contrast to the situation at Burnway, where most pupils were unconcerned about being in the bottom set in PE. When asked how being in the bottom set in PE made them feel, Maya and Billy remarked:

> "PE is important in the school. It just means I've got to try harder. I think there's more pressure to be good at PE in this school. Even for the girls". (Maya, Bottom set, Oakside)

> "It's important to be good at PE because we are such a judgemental school. We're a sports college. Everyone is labelled in PE. I think gender plays a part in that too. You don't really hear girls getting judged for being in the bottom set, but lads are. It makes you feel worthless". (Billy, Bottom set, Oakside)

Maya and Billy's comments draw attention to the complex interplay between gender-based ability expectations and the impact of the enactment of setting policy in PE at Oakside. In the case of Maya and many of the other girls in the school, they were aware of the possible contradictions between being a girl and being in the top set in PE. However, the elevated status of PE in the school created a situation where they felt they could negotiate these tensions. In the Foucauldian sense, they were able to position themselves as being good at PE because they had access to institutional discourses around competence in PE. As Harley and Emily explained:

> "There's more emphasis on sport in the school. We're a sports college, so PE is focussed on more. I think that takes the pressure off being in the top set. We don't get abuse for it. I think the other sets respect us". (Harley, Top set, Oakside)

> "I like being in the top set in PE. The school is all about sport. So, I think it's ok to be good at PE. It's not frowned upon. It probably would be if we weren't a sports college though". (Emily, Top set, Oakside)

Harley also emphasised that she felt more confident displaying her ability in PE because she was separate from girls in the middle and bottom sets. She expressed a fear of being judged by these girls for trying hard and being good at PE. This supports Gore's (1995, p. 170) assertion that "surveillance is not solely the province of the teacher" but can also be exercised by pupils. In this respect, Harley suggested that she would regulate her behaviour to conform to gender norms and expectations. Harley's comments indicated that she could position herself differently in relation to gender discourses according to the peer group context she found herself in (Reay, 2001; Garrett & Wrench, 2007). Her comments also point to the importance of peer group solidarity in negotiating discourses of gender in PE. As Harley explained:

> "We're in a separate lesson from the rest of the girls. So, they can't see us and call us. They don't know what we're doing. They can't be judgemental. They would be if we were all together. I would have to do things differently then. We don't call anyone in our set names though. We're all in the same boat. So, there's less pressure. We can try hard and be good at PE because we're all in the top set". (Harley, Top set, Oakside)

In contrast to Harley and Emily, Billy and the other boys in the bottom set at Oakside reported intense feelings of inadequacy in PE. For the most part, these feelings related to dominant discourses of masculinity. They also resulted from their lack of opportunities in PE, and I discuss these later in the chapter. For example, some of the boys at Oakside noted the contradiction between being a boy and being in the bottom set in PE. This was evident in Billy's comments. He said:

> "We're boys and we're supposed to be good at PE and sport. So, it's really embarrassing being in the bottom set. I want to be good at PE". (Billy, Bottom set, Oakside)

This problem was made more acute by the fact that the school was a specialist sports college and that the boys in the bottom set often had PE lessons in close proximity to the boys in the top and middle sets. This meant that their abilities were visible and could be surveilled and judged by higher ability peers in PE. The boys in the bottom set at Oakside adopted a range of strategies to negotiate the tensions and conflicts between being a boy and being in the bottom set in PE. These included being badly behaved and acting aggressively and competitively in PE. This may offer an alternative explanation for the misbehaving bottom set in PE. In this regard, the boys in the bottom set at Oakside chose to construct their gendered subjectivities in accordance with masculine discourses and practices. In doing so, they were able to elude the scrutiny of boys in the top and middle sets in PE. As Scott explained:

> "It's a bit of a problem for us. We're in the bottom set and the other sets know it. They shout abuse at us all the time. They're usually in the same sports hall. They can see what we're doing. I wouldn't be as bothered if they couldn't. So, I act up a bit and mess around. I'm pretty sure the top set think I'm in the bottom set because of my behaviour rather than my ability". (Scott, Bottom set, Oakside)

There was a difference in opinion on the possibility of moving between sets in PE at Oakside. For example, pupils in the middle and bottom sets were firm in their belief that they had little to no chance of moving to the top set in PE. They were also aware of how restricted and constrained their opportunities were to do so. For example, like PE teachers (see Chapter Six), they asserted that movement to the top set was precluded by curriculum factors and a lack of

available space. This led pupils at Oakside to conclude that 'if' movement between groups occurred, it would be from the top set to the middle or the bottom set. Omar and Billy explained:

> "I want to move to the top set, but it's so big. It's double the size of ours. I'm not sure why it's so big. Half the boys in the year group are in the top set. So, there's little to no chance of moving up because there isn't enough space. I think some people have moved down though. They didn't take GCSE". (Omar, Middle set, Oakside)

> "You can only have so many students in the top set. So, the rest have to go in the middle or the bottom. You would also repeat some of the activities if they moved you. So, it's because of the sizes of the groups and the PE curriculum". (Billy, Bottom set, Oakside)

The lack of movement between sets at Oakside was a source of consternation for some pupils who wanted to move to the top set to enhance their status among their peers and study GCSE PE. Nonetheless, they felt a sense of powerlessness in this situation. For example, Omar reported that he tried hard in PE in the hope that he would be moved to the top set. This did not result in a change in Omar's set placement and he arrived at the conclusion that there was no point in wasting his efforts in PE. Instead, he chose to direct his efforts towards subjects where they were appreciated and rewarded. Omar explained:

> "I was trying really hard in PE. It didn't get me into the top set though. So, I just give up. It was really embarrassing. I focus more on other subjects now. I'm in the top set in all my other subjects. I'm appreciated in these subjects. The teachers always compliment me for trying hard". (Omar, Middle set, Oakside)

The main reason for pupils wanting to change set in PE at Oakside related to learning. This point was expressed strongly and repeatedly by pupils in the bottom set. They talked at length about the greater focus on behaviour in the bottom set, suggesting that PE teachers were more

concerned with management issues than with extending their learning in PE. This reflects some of Charlene and Paul's earlier concerns (see Chapter Six) and highlights one of the main problems with allocating and/or moving pupils to the bottom set for behaviour reasons. As Hallam and Parsons (2013a) correctly point out, placing misbehaving pupils in low sets "merely relocates the problem" (p. 411). Nonetheless, this practice has been widely reported in the literature (Ball, 1981; Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Smith & Sutherland, 2003, 2006; Araújo, 2007; Dunne *et al*., 2011; Croston, 2014) and it was used by PE teachers at Oakside. Some of the pupils in the bottom set at Oakside wanted to move to a set that would be more conducive to their learning. Two pupils commented:

> "I try really hard in PE, but sometimes I wonder why. Most of the students with behaviour issues are in my set. I'm constantly getting distracted. The teachers are always dealing with them and it means that I don't get any of their attention. I really want to move to a different group to get away from it all. I think I would learn more in the middle or the top set because there wouldn't be as many distractions". (Billy, Bottom set, Oakside)

> "I would like to move to the middle. We have students in our set who are nasty and make it horrible. They always waste time. The teacher is always distracted by them. It impacts on my learning. In the middle it's not like that". (Ben, Bottom set, Oakside)

The pupils in the middle set at Oakside seemed more content with their set placement in PE. Only Omar and Aimee indicated that they wanted to move to a different set. This contrasted with seven pupils in the bottom set. Most of the pupils in the middle set at Oakside were aware of the negative labelling and stigmatisation attached to those in the bottom set in PE. They were equally aware of the pressures associated with being in the top set in PE. Accordingly, they felt that being in the middle was the safest place to be. This supports the findings of Hallam and

Ireson (2007, p. 40), who reported that some pupils in mathematics, English, and science classes wanted to be average "to fit in and be accepted by peers". Connor and Jessica explained:

> "I'm happy where I am. There are higher expectations in the top set. You need to be getting high grades and you can't slip up. There is less pressure in the bottom set, but everyone looks down on them. I wouldn't want that. There's less pressure on me in the middle set and I don't have to worry about name calling". (Connor, Middle set, Oakside)

> "I don't mind people calling me middle because it doesn't mean you're really high ability and it doesn't mean you're really low". (Jessica, Middle set, Oakside)

In contrast, pupils in the top set at Oakside suggested that they could easily 'be' moved between sets in PE. For example, although Jack had not transitioned between sets, he briefly explained:

> "We can definitely be moved to the middle or the bottom set. I've seen it happen this year. It can happen whenever". (Jack, Top set, Oakside)

A common view held by pupils in the top set at Oakside was that poor behaviour could result in movement to the middle or bottom set in PE. Owen, Jessica, Lola, and Georgia had all been transferred from the top set to the middle set in PE and interpreted this as resulting from their behaviour and effort, rather than their ability. Owen explained:

> "They [PE teachers] send you down to the middle or the bottom set if you misbehave or don't put any effort in. It's not through ability. I'm in the middle set, but I was in the top set at the start of the year. I'm the only one in the middle set doing GCSE PE. PE was boring at the start of the year. I wasn't trying and was messing about. I was told that if I started to try a bit more, I would be moved back to the top set. Between Year 9 and Year 10 they can also kick you out of GCSE PE. They can move you to BTEC. If we don't do our homework, they will move us down as well". (Owen, Middle set, Oakside)

PE teachers at Oakside were disciplining pupils to follow rules, using a range of sanctions and rewards to deter pupils from exhibiting poor behaviour in PE. This included moving pupils down if they misbehaved and returning them to the top set if they improved their behaviour (see Chapter Six). The power of this strategy can be seen in Owen and Jessica's acknowledgement that the opportunity to move back to the top set incentivised or, in Foucauldian terms, disciplined them to improve their behaviour and effort in PE. In this way, setting had a regulatory effect on Owen and Jessica (Foucault, 1979, 1980a; Gore, 1995). This is clear in the following responses:

> "At first, it was really embarrassing getting moved down. It made me not want to do PE. But I'm really starting to try now. I'm doing everything I've been told to do. I want to get back into the top set". (Owen, Middle set, Oakside)

> "It's a bit embarrassing getting dropped a set. I was unhappy when I was told I was moving down. I lost a bit of confidence. I still think I'm high ability though. I just need to keep working harder to make sure I get moved back up". (Jessica, Middle Set, Oakside)

The pupils at Oakside made frequent references to the different educational and vocational opportunities afforded to different sets in PE. They believed that more opportunities were given to those in the top set in PE. For example, most of the pupils in the top set at Oakside reported that they benefited from a wide range of additional opportunities in PE, including interviewing candidates for teaching positions, attending extra-curricular clubs, going on school trips, and studying GCSE PE. Kieran, Christina, and Josh emphasised that these opportunities enabled them to learn more and progress to higher levels in PE. Other studies have similarly reported that high ability pupils are privileged in terms of access to resources and support in PE (Hay,

2008; Penney & Hay, 2008; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a; Croston, 2013, 2014). Josh talked about these opportunities as follows:

> "We definitely get more opportunities in PE. We get to go on trips all the time. We get asked to go to clubs after school. We get to do interviews with the new PE teachers. We all do GCSE as well. The middle and the bottom set don't get these opportunities. We're treated a lot better as well. We're the favourites. We never get shouted at. We're an example. We're the role models for PE in the school". (Josh, Top set, Oakside)

Not all the pupils in the top set at Oakside spoke positively about the additional opportunities that were afforded to them in PE. For example, some disagreed with the process of selecting pupils for GCSE PE. They explained that PE teachers expected them to study GCSE PE because they were in the top set at the end of Year 8. They also noted that PE teachers warned them that if they did not select PE as an option for GCSE, they would be moved into the middle or bottom set. Some pupils at Oakside were therefore caught in a double bind between choosing to study GCSE PE and being moved into the middle or bottom set in PE. It was clear, therefore, that pupils in the top set had little freedom to decide if they wanted to take GCSE PE. Instead, from a Foucauldian perspective, PE teachers were using techniques of power to constrain pupils' choices (Foucault, 1979, 1980a, 1980b; Gore, 1995). In this case, PE teachers "structured the environment" (McEvilly, 2012, p. 203) in such a way as to regulate and control pupils. Indeed, although they did not originally intend to study GCSE PE, some of the top set pupils at Oakside indicated that they did so to avoid being moved into the middle or bottom set in PE. The following comments are illustrative of this situation:

> "The teachers told us at the end of Year 8 that we should all be doing GCSE PE. If we didn't pick GCSE PE, we were told that we would be moved down into the middle or the bottom set. I wasn't really that bothered about doing GCSE PE, but I really didn't want

to be moved down. In the end, I picked GCSE. I felt I had to because I didn't want to be away from my friends, and I would have been really embarrassed if they had moved me down". (Arthur, Top set, Oakside)

"We all do GCSE PE. The teachers expected us to do it. I got blackmailed to do it. I didn't want to do it. When I was picking my options there was a PE teacher standing over me pressuring me to pick PE. The PE teachers also told us they would move us down if we didn't take GCSE. It was well annoying when they were saying that it was our choice. They were forcing us to do it". (Ellie, Top set, Oakside)

In contrast, pupils in the middle and bottom sets at Oakside felt that setting severely restricted the opportunities available to them in PE. These pupils tended to talk about this in two main ways: first, in terms of the limited opportunities available to them outside of the PE curriculum; and, second, in terms of the limited opportunity for them to take GCSE PE. Setting was highlighted as a contributing factor towards the lack of opportunities for middle and bottom set pupils at Oakside to attend extra-curricular clubs and go on school trips. This was explained in the following way:

"We don't have the same opportunities as the top set. They get to go out of school and do different competitions. There was an athletics competition on Friday, and it was only the top set that got asked to go. It's all the top set and not just a few of them. No one from our set got the chance to go. The full class got to do athletics in a big stadium. We didn't get that opportunity. We never get asked to go on trips. For being a Sports College, there isn't many opportunities available to us". (Aiden, Middle set, Oakside)

"We miss out on opportunities because we're the bottom set. It's the same for everyone in our set. So, for the clubs and stuff, they [the PE teachers] choose you. If you don't get

chosen, then you can't go. You can't do it voluntarily. So, we miss out on opportunities to develop our skills. To work with coaches and stuff'. (Eleanor, Bottom set, Oakside)

Most pupils at Oakside also recognised that their set placement had a crucial impact on their access to GCSE PE. Although this issue was not raised by pupils in the top set, it was frequently mentioned by those in the middle and bottom sets in PE. There was a strong belief among these pupils that they were not permitted to take GCSE PE. As Mitchell explained:

"You have to be in the top set to take GCSE. If you're not, you can't take it. I've always been in the bottom set, so I have no option to take it". (Mitchell, Bottom set, Oakside)

The pupils in the middle and bottom sets in PE at Oakside suggested two main reasons for this. First, they were acutely aware that PE teachers made their GCSE PE decisions at the end of Year 8. Because they were not in the top set when these decisions were made, pupils in the middle and bottom sets at Oakside believed that they were not eligible for GCSE PE. Second, as I explained earlier in this chapter, pupils in the middle and bottom sets at Oakside believed that they could not ascend to the top set in PE. This left them feeling that they were unable to affect PE teachers' decisions about GCSE PE. It also reinforced the belief of some pupils that they were of less worth than pupils in the top set in PE. This is evident in the following comments by Billy and Sasha:

"I wanted to try GCSE PE, but I was told I couldn't because I'm in the bottom set. It's the same for all of us in the bottom set. It's really embarrassing. It just makes you think that you're terrible at PE. That's the way I feel anyway". (Billy, Bottom set, Oakside)

"The top set is prioritised because they take GCSE PE. They all had to do GCSE PE. Well not had to, but they were asked to at the end of Year 8. I couldn't take GCSE PE because I've always been in the middle set and they just asked those in the top set. I

> wanted to take GCSE PE, but I'm stuck in the middle set. I'm just average. I think everyone should be given the same opportunities. So, just because I'm not as good as the top set, it doesn't mean that I wouldn't try and do my best. I just think what's the point in PE anymore. It's really frustrating". (Sasha, Middle set, Oakside)

The linking of set placement and entry to GCSE PE had considerable implications for some pupils at Oakside. It is important to underscore that pupils were set early in PE in the school and they also experienced limited upward movement between sets in PE. PE teachers and pupils suggested that most movement was downwards in PE. One result of this was that pupils who were placed in the middle or bottom set in Year 7 were unlikely to be able to study GCSE PE in Year 9. Some pupils at Oakside expressed the wish to move to the top set to study GCSE PE. However, the lack of flexibility in movement between sets meant that GCSE PE continued to be inaccessible to them. The pupils in the middle and bottom sets at Oakside also suggested that their set placement excluded them from opportunities to attend after-school clubs and school trips. Notably, they recognised that these opportunities would perhaps have enabled them to develop their motor skills – the determining factor in PE teachers' setting decisions (see Chapter Six). Exclusion from these opportunities left some pupils at Oakside feeling frustrated, disillusioned, and disenfranchised. As Sasha poignantly remarked: "I just think what's the point in PE anymore". Such feelings were not limited to pupils in the middle and bottom sets at Oakside. Instead, some pupils in the top set also described feeling constrained by their set placement and the intensified pressure on them to select GCSE PE.

Sandwest

The pupils at Sandwest believed that sets were configured according to ability, effort, and behaviour in PE. This perception was prominent in the focus group interviews with pupils in

the top set at Sandwest. The boys in the top set at Sandwest also emphasised that they could be moved down sets if they misbehaved in PE, something they were keen to avoid. Shaun, for example, explained:

> "We are in the top set because of our ability. Maybe our effort and behaviour as well. We try harder and are better behaved than the bottom set. But we could still end up in the bottom set if we mess around. That's not going to happen". (Shaun, Top set, Sandwest)

Setting impacted on pupils' perceptions of themselves and their ability in PE at Sandwest. For example, being in the top set at Sandwest reinforced their beliefs that they were the most able in PE. However, this was problematic for the girls at Sandwest. I discuss this point in detail below. The boys at Sandwest were more positive about being in the top set in PE. When I asked them how they felt about being in the top set in PE, the following comments were typical:

> "It makes me feel great. I'm really proud of myself". (Ellis, Top set, Sandwest)

> "It's great. It means we are the best in the year group. So, it gives you a bit of confidence in PE". (Chris, Top set, Sandwest)

There were fewer references to ability in focus group interviews with pupils in the bottom set in PE at Sandwest. Instead, like the findings from other studies (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson *et al*., 2002; Macintyre & Ireson, 2002; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Araújo, 2007; Marks, 2012), most of these pupils felt that their set placement was based on arbitrary criteria, such as behaviour and effort. It was common for pupils in the bottom set at Sandwest to refer to themselves as the behaviour group. The pupils in the bottom set at Sandwest were not dismissing the importance of behaviour in PE but were firm in their belief that it should not be a factor in being placed in the bottom set. In this regard, reflecting the findings from previous studies (Hallam & Deathe, 2002; Macintyre & Ireson,

2002; Hallam & Ireson, 2007), some of the pupils in the bottom set in PE were discontent with their set placement. This was particularly evident in the comments of the boys. Toby and Ian expressed their frustrations as follows:

> "I think I was put in the bottom set because of behaviour. It's a bit unfair though. I thought setting was supposed to be about how good you are". (Toby, Bottom set, Sandwest)

> "We're the behaviour group as we call it. I think the teachers just put anyone who misbehaved or didn't try in the bottom set. It's frustrating because I think I'm better than that". (Ian, Bottom set, Sandwest)

The boys in the bottom set at Sandwest suggested that it was possible to move between sets in PE and outlined how this could be achieved. They explained that PE teachers had informed them that they would be moved to the top set if they improved their behaviour and attitude in PE. Some of the pupils in the bottom set at Sandwest used the example of Samuel, who had moved to the top set, to support this suggestion. I discuss Samuel below. Significantly, however, none of the boys that I interviewed at Sandwest wanted to move to the top set in PE. This was despite some of them reporting that they were discontent with their set placement. The following comments were typical of this situation:

> "I'm not happy that I'm in the behaviour group. I think I'm better than that. But it doesn't mean that I want to move to the top set. I'm with my friends and we have a laugh in PE. I think things would be more serious in the top set". (Ian, Bottom set, Sandwest)

The boys that I interviewed at Sandwest seemed comfortable with being in the bottom set in PE. They were aware of the tensions and dilemmas between being a boy and being in the bottom set in PE. However, Jamie, Ian, Dane, and Toby indicated that they experienced a sense of agency because they were seen by boys in the top set as the behaviour group. They

suggested, therefore, that they did not need to negotiate their subjectivities because the boys in the top set already perceived them to be engaging in masculine discourses and practices, such as rule-breaking and misbehaving. In trying to explain how he was able to maintain his position as a low ability boy in PE, Jamie remarked:

> "They [the boys in the top set] call us the behaviour group all the time. It probably works out for us. They don't question us as much on our ability because they think we're in the bottom set because of our behaviour. It takes the pressure off. I can just take things easy. I don't have to pretend to like PE". (Jamie, Bottom set, Sandwest)

In contrast to Oakside, it was the girls in the top set rather than the girls in the bottom set at Sandwest who were reporting high levels of anxiety in PE. This anxiety related to their perception that being able in PE was incompatible with high-status femininity. As With-Nielsen & Pfister (2011) explain, "the dominant values and behaviour patterns in PE are masculine, and girls who are good at sport can easily be stigmatised as tomboys". This point was brought out particularly clearly in comments from Melissa, who highlighted the challenges and dilemmas facing girls in the top set in PE. She remarked:

> "Boys are supposed to be good at sport. It's a stereotypical thing. They are boys and that's what they should be good at. It's different for girls. There's more pressure on us if we're good at sport. I'm in the top set and the other girls tease me all the time. They call me the teacher's pet. I've been called worse as well". (Melissa, Top set, Sandwest)

The girls in the top set in PE at Sandwest developed a range of strategies to negotiate these challenges and dilemmas. For example, Nicole and Jodie demonstrated their femininity by putting in minimal effort and downplaying their achievements in PE. In comparison, Morgan and Caitlin found a balance between performing femininity and ability in PE. They explained that they could be both able and feminine by investing in activities that were consistent with

gender expectations, such as dance and aerobics. In doing so, Morgan and Caitlin avoided having their femininity called into question by other girls in PE. Caitlin recounted:

> "I like PE. It's something I'm good at. I do loads of stuff outside of PE. I play football. A few of us in the top set do. I'm not very good though. I also do a lot of dance. I think it helps with being in the top set in PE. It's more acceptable to be a dancer than a footballer. The girls know I'm a good dancer and this kind of means I avoid the horrible things that are said to some of the girls in the set". (Caitlin, Top set, Sandwest)

In this respect, although Nicole, Jodie, Morgan, and Caitlin were constrained by dominant discourses of femininity, they were nonetheless playing an active role in constituting and governing themselves in PE (Garrett & Wrench, 2007; Atencio & Wright, 2009; Rich *et al*., 2011). This follows Foucault's view that individuals are "not merely the receptors of or the effects of discourse, but are desiring subjects involved in their own self-constitution" (O'Flynn, 2004, p. 11).

Samuel was the only pupil that I interviewed who had moved from the bottom set to the top set in PE. He attributed this to his high levels of effort and good behaviour in PE. Initially, this move was a source of anxiety and pressure for Samuel. He acknowledged, however, that he now felt more confident and comfortable in the top set. Samuel recounted:

> "I was really nervous about moving. I didn't want to be away from my friends. I didn't think I was good enough either. So, I knew I would have to try even harder in PE. The move has had a positive impact on me though. It's been a massive confidence boost". (Samuel, Top set, Sandwest)

Moving to the top set had a positive impact on Samuel's perception of his ability. For example, he noted that the experience disrupted his perception of himself as a low ability pupil in PE. Samuel did not explicitly identify himself as a high ability pupil in PE but spoke at length about how he believed he was more able than he used to be. Moving to the top set also challenged, and ultimately changed, the way Samuel conceptualised ability in PE. The following quote illustrates this point well:

> "I used to have a fixed mind-set and didn't think I could get any better at PE. When I was moved up to the top set, I realised that it meant I was doing better. If I was in the bottom set, I would still have that fixed mind-set. But I'm going to pick GCSE PE now. I wasn't going to before I got moved sets. I didn't think I was able enough to do it. I know that if I keep working hard, I will continue to improve my ability though. So, I just think I should give it a try and see what happens". (Samuel, Top Set, Sandwest)

Samuel's comments highlight the powerful ways in which movement between sets can impact on pupils' perceptions of ability and its supposed stability. Like most of the pupils in the sample, Samuel originally believed that his ability level was fixed. However, his move to the top set challenged this belief. Samuel changed his mind-set and he now believed that he could improve, and continue to improve, his ability in PE. The move to the top set also had wider implications for Samuel, as he noted that he now felt a greater sense of being able to study GCSE PE in Year 10.

Some of the pupils in the bottom set at Sandwest emphasised the variable nature of grouping in PE and highlighted how this impacted on their sense of self and subjectivities. They recounted that they started Year 7 in mixed-ability groups but were assigned to sets by PE teachers a few months later. This was a public event and led to teasing as other pupils became

aware of their set placement in PE. As such, contrary to PE teachers' perceptions (see Chapter Six), some of the pupils in the bottom set at Sandwest reported that they would have preferred to be set on entry to the school, or at least in a less overt way without others being aware of the procedures and processes. As Kadie explained:

> "I think it would have been better if they grouped us straight away. People would have been less judgemental. We didn't know a lot about each other when we first got here. So, they [PE teachers] could have done it in a way that no one knew why they were in different groups in PE". (Kadie, Bottom set, Sandwest)

The pupils in the bottom set at Sandwest were using peer comparison to develop an understanding of their ability in PE. Nonetheless, they viewed setting as problematic because it formalised the differences in ability between pupils. As Gillborn and Youdell (2000, p. 132) observe, setting makes "concrete previously hidden differences" in teachers' perceptions and expectations of pupils' abilities. This was a source of embarrassment for some pupils at Sandwest and deterred them from investing their efforts in PE. For example, Jamie commented:

> "I don't like that setting makes us aware of our abilities in PE. We knew when we were in mixed-ability groups anyway. We can make that judgement ourselves. We don't need our teachers to tell us by setting us. It's embarrassing. I'm in the bottom set and I just don't see the point in trying in PE". (Jamie, Bottom set, Sandwest)

Pupils at Sandwest were aware that PE teachers referred to sets using colours. They also demonstrated some understanding of why they did so. For example, Hannah commented:

> "Last year we were the performance and individual groups and this year we are colours. You have the red and green group for boys and the blue and yellow group for girls. I

think they've done it to stop us calling each other names. I'd rather be called the yellow group than the bottom set. It doesn't happen though". (Hannah, Bottom set, Sandwest)

It was clear that most pupils at Sandwest were not using different colours to refer to themselves and others in PE. As evidenced during the focus group interviews, none of the pupils at Sandwest referred to themselves or others as the red, green, blue, or yellow set. Further, they did not mention colours until they were prompted to do so. Instead, they continued to identify themselves and others as the top or bottom set in PE. There was consensus among the pupils at Sandwest that the use of colours did not work because of the embodied nature of the PE environment. This point was articulated by Jamie and Kate:

"It hasn't made any difference. It's just a change in name. Your abilities are still out there in PE. You just look around and see who's in different groups and you know what group you're in. It's obvious". (Jamie, Bottom set, Sandwest)

"There's no point in using colours. You just know who is good and bad at PE. You can see it. There's no hiding from it. You can't fade into the background like you can in other subjects. The only way to do that is to forget your kit". (Kate, Bottom set, Sandwest)

PE was perceived by pupils at Sandwest to be a subject in which the relations and differences between pupils were particularly visible. In this regard, despite the use of colours, the pupils at Sandwest suggested that they were able to use peer comparison to make judgments about their levels of ability in PE. This finding is similar to that previously reported in PE (Burrows & Wright, 2001; Hunter, 2004; Hay & lisahunter, 2006; Hay, 2008; Croston, 2014). Further, as Marks (2013) points out, even in the absence of explicit ability labels, "ability identifiers so saturate the English education system that pupils are provided with ample labels to form the same categories and judgements of themselves and others" (p. 35).

Discussion and conclusion

The findings reported in this chapter indicate that the enactment of setting policy affected different pupils in different ways in PE. Setting impacted on pupils' ability-related subjectivities, understandings of ability, attitude towards PE, and motivation to engage in sport and physical activity opportunities outside of PE. These impacts were mediated by a range of factors, including placement in a particular set, the amount of movement between sets, educational and vocational aspirations, gender, and school specialism. The data also suggested that setting had a greater impact on pupils in more overtly ability organised PE lessons. The boys that I interviewed at Burnway believed that friendship was the major consideration in setting decisions in PE and, as such, were happy with their set placement. In contrast, the views of pupils at Oakside and Sandwest were more mixed. Some pupils felt judged on their physical ability and others on their behaviour and effort. In addition, some pupils reported that they wanted to move sets and others were content with their set placement in PE. The findings reinforce the importance of gaining more nuanced and contextualised understandings of the ways in which setting impacts on different pupils within and between different schools and sets in PE.

The majority of pupils at Oakside and Sandwest were making sense of their abilities in relation to discourses of competitive sport. Previous research similarly points to PE as a context in which discourses of competitive sport are likely to provide the dominant frame for understandings of ability (Evans & Penney, 2008; Penney & Hay, 2008; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a; Wilkinson *et al*., 2013; Tidén *et al*., 2017). These discourses reinforced the narrow ways pupils at Oakside and Sandwest came to understand themselves and others in PE. For example,

some pupils felt that they were less able than others in PE because they were not involved or interested in competitive team sports. A few of the pupils in the middle and bottom sets at Oakside problematised and questioned dominant discourses of ability in PE. In doing so, they developed a sense of self and subjectivity that was constructed around broader notions of ability. Aimee and Ben self-defined as able in activities that were not in the PE curriculum, including swimming, climbing, and fishing. This led them to challenge and contest PE teachers' conceptions of their ability and their set placement in PE. For example, Aimee asserted that she was just as good as pupils in the top set in PE. Foucault (1996, 1997, 2000) suggested that this self-constitution is achieved by engaging in technologies of the self (Garrett & Wrench, 2007; Drew & Gore, 2016). McEvilly (2012) explains that technologies of the self "provide a means to move beyond a determining view of discourse to an understanding of individuals as having opportunities to be reflective and make choices" (p. 76). In this case, by reflecting on some of their experiences outside of the school, Aimee and Ben believed that they were classified as low ability in PE because both the curriculum and the decision making of PE teachers were not inclusive of their interests and abilities.

Data also revealed that pupils made clear links between their set placement, how they were perceived by peers, and how they felt about PE. For example, pupils in the top sets at Oakside and Sandwest generally developed a sense of themselves as better at PE than those in the middle and bottom sets. They also reported a range of benefits of being in the top set in PE, including increased access to opportunities and support. This finding is similar to that reported in previous studies of setting (Boaler 1997a, 1997b; Boler *et al*., 2000; Marks, 2012; Croston, 2014; Archer *et al*., 2018). The comments of pupils in the top set were not all positive and seemed to reflect gendered understandings of ability. For example, placement in the top set in PE was problematic for girls at Sandwest because they felt that it positioned them outside

conventional modes of femininity (Renold, 2001; Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Flintoff & Scraton, 2006). In this regard, setting was a great source of anxiety for these girls as they struggled to manage the contradiction between being both in the top set and being feminine in PE. Nonetheless, like those in previous research (Renold, 2001, 2002; O'Flynn, 2004; Hay & Macdonald, 2010b; Clark, 2015), some of the girls at Sandwest exercised their agency and developed ways to manage and negotiate these contradictory demands, including downplaying and hiding their achievements in PE.

The girls in the top set at Oakside also felt that it was possible to negotiate these competing demands in PE. However, in contrast to those at Sandwest, they explained this with reference to the status of PE in the school. The girls in the top set at Oakside asserted that it was possible to be both a girl and able in PE because the school was a specialist sports college. Weedon (1997, p. 94) points out that particular "forms of subjectivity are more readily available" to individuals than others "depending on the social status and power of the discourse in question". In this case, the girls at Oakside could position themselves differently in relation to gender discourses because discourses of competence in PE were particularly powerful at the school. Foucault's concept of technologies of the self can be used to understand how these girls were constructing their subjectivities in PE (Foucault, 1996, 1997, 2000). From a Foucauldian perspective, the girls were actively involved in constructing their subjectivities by "choosing to invest in certain discourses over others" (Atencio & Wright, 2009, p. 34). In this regard, by drawing on institutional discourses of competence in PE, they were able to see themselves and construct themselves as good at PE.

In contrast to the girls, it was the boys in the bottom set at Oakside and Sandwest who were concerned about their set placement in PE. Setting was a great source of anxiety for most of these boys because it legitimised and made transparent differences in ability in PE. As Hallam *et al*. (2004b, p. 527) point out, "where pupils are taken out of classes or move to different rooms for setting procedures the groupings become apparent to everyone". Most of the boys in the bottom set at Oakside and Sandwest also spoke at length about the discrepancies between being a boy and being in the bottom set in PE. This problem was particularly acute at Oakside, where discourses of competence in PE were powerful. Like the girls, the boys at Oakside developed strategies to negotiate dominant discourses and gendered power relations in PE. This included acting aggressively and competitively in PE to validate their masculinity to boys in the top set. The boys in the bottom set at Sandwest were able to negotiate dominant discourses of gender in a furtive way. They explained that they did not have to alter their performances of gender because the boys in the top set already perceived them to be engaging in masculine discourses and practices, such as rule-breaking and misbehaving.

Placement in the bottom set tended to strengthen pupils' perceptions that they were less able in PE. This resulted in negative and marginalised experiences for some pupils, especially those at Oakside. There was a strong belief among pupils at Oakside that it was important to be seen to be able in PE because the school was a specialist sports college. This finding provides some support to Graham *et al*.'s (2002, p. 330) suggestion that "one might expect learners to attribute importance to the specialism promoted in their school". These pupils were frustrated and disillusioned that they were in the bottom set in PE and this impacted negatively on their motivation to engage in PE. In comparison, some pupils expressed a lack of concern about being in the bottom set in PE. Most of these pupils were drawing on dominant discourses of educational achievement to constitute their subjectivities in PE. They acquired a positive sense

of self through excelling in the core subjects of mathematics, English, and science. They were not concerned about being in the bottom set in PE because the subject was less important to their sense of self and their educational and vocational aspirations. It is possible that this lack of concern may also have been an attempt to protect the self against failure, humiliation, and anxiety. Croston (2014, p. 189) points out that "pupils have been shown to compensate for a lack of perceived physical ability by lowering their value of PE to maintain their overall esteem".

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight that multiple, and often competing, discourses operate in different schools and provide opportunities for pupils to constitute their subjectivities in different ways in PE. These discourses were taken up, resisted, and negotiated by pupils in varying ways in the study. For example, many pupils made sense of their subjectivities in relation to dominant discourses of ability in PE. This led pupils to construct understandings of ability in relation to competitive team sports. The enactment of setting also contributed to pupils' perceptions of their own and others' ability in PE. For example, some pupils did not see themselves or others as having ability in PE because their bodies, predispositions, and subjectivities were not recognised as of value in PE teachers' setting decisions. They were therefore likely to find themselves in the bottom set in PE. This left some pupils feeling frustrated and disillusioned with themselves and with PE. These effects were mediated by pupils' educational and vocational aspirations, their gender, and the ethos of the school they attended.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

Introduction

The aims of this chapter are to provide an overview of the findings of the study, to draw together their implications, and to reflect on the research process. The chapter is organised into three sections that reflect these aims. The first section discusses the main findings of the study in relation to the research questions and the extant literature. The second section considers the implications of the findings. This section is split into two subsections. It addresses the implications of the findings for future research, and the implications of the findings for policy and practice. In the third and final section, I reflect on the trials and tribulations of conducting this study.

Summarising the findings

This research has contributed to understanding of the intended and unintended consequences of policy, particularly in terms of power, resistance, and the subjectivities of those who interpret, enact, and experience policy in PE. The findings highlight the powerful and overarching influence of neoliberal ideology on the policy decisions of teachers in PE. As shown in Chapters Six and Seven, setting was integral to their strategy for dealing with concerns about standards, accountability, efficiency, and competition. PE teachers interpreted and enacted the policy of setting as a means of obtaining funding, enhancing their status and position in the school curriculum, and appeasing the senior leadership team and Ofsted inspectors. For example, as reported in Chapters Five and Six, PE teachers at Oakside adopted the policy of setting in attempts to maximise performance, to concentrate resources on potential

high attainers, and to present the subject as an attractive GCSE option choice. PE teachers were not necessarily comfortable with these strategies but felt they had little choice but to adopt them because of the consequences of failing to achieve their performance targets. These findings lend support to the proposition that, in neoliberal times, teacher subjectivity and their disciplinary knowledge and commitment are second to market responsiveness and short-terminism (Beck, 1999; Macdonald, 2015).

The findings also highlight some of the ethical challenges facing teachers as they attempt to respond to market forces in PE. PE teachers in all three case study schools expressed several concerns about the policy of setting, particularly in terms of its impact on less able pupils in PE. Nonetheless, the requirements of performativity created an imperative for them to adopt policies that would enhance A* to C grades in GCSE PE, even if this was at the expense of broader educational objectives and their responsibility to all pupils in PE. Most PE teachers argued that they had to prioritise the needs of more able pupils because they were the ones who were more likely to contribute to school performance indicators. As Ball (2008, 2013) points out, markets and competition create 'local economies of pupil worth' in which pupils are valued, or not, based on whether they are likely to contribute to measurable improvements and performance outputs. Neoliberal systems of government and techniques of power, including hierarchical observations, normalising judgements, and methods of evaluation, ensured that PE teachers responded to performative ideals and expectations. For example, as explained in Chapter Six, PE teachers at Oakside disproportionately focussed attention on higher attaining pupils because their funding was contingent on A* to C grades in GCSE PE, and PE teachers at Sandwest moved away from mixed-ability grouping because they believed that they were more likely to receive a higher Ofsted rating for using setting in PE. In this regard, PE teachers

changed or adapted their practices to conform with the funding requirements of the LEA and the Ofsted inspection regime.

Evans (2014b, p. 546) points out that "teachers, pupils, and other education personnel are not cultural dupes or dopes or mere conduits of policy". The study provided evidence that both teachers and pupils were exercising agency in PE, while also acting in conditions that were in some respects powerfully shaped by policy. The data showed that PE teachers were exercising agency in translating and adapting policy to fit the cultural, social, and material structure of their school, their values and beliefs about teaching and learning, and the needs of their pupils. The agency of teachers was mediated by the interplay of individual, contextual, and structural factors, including past experiences, educational philosophies, professional relationships, school priorities, available resources, and the broader policy environment. For example, as shown in Chapter Six, PE teachers at Oakside were able to negotiate the policy directives of the senior leadership team because of their status and experience in the school, and because the subject was in a strong position in the intra-school market – the department achieved good GCSE results and had an oversupply of pupils studying GCSE PE. PE teachers at Burnway and Sandwest were also modifying policy requirements in original and creative ways because the location and status of the PE department made the enactment of policy less visible to the senior leadership team.

Some pupils also demonstrated their agency by challenging and questioning their set placement, PE teachers' conceptions of their ability, and expectations of how they should act in PE. As shown in Chapter Seven, most boys in the top set felt a positive sense of self and ability in the subject. These feelings were not expressed by all pupils in the top set. Some of

the girls in the study were anxious and frustrated about being in the top set in PE. This related to their perception that being good at PE was incompatible with conventions of femininity. Wrench and Garrett (2015, p. 34) point out that "where subjectivity is premised on a masculine norm" girls face the "dilemma of being recognisably female". The findings indicated that girls could exercise agency and constitute their subjectivities in different ways in PE. As reported in Chapter Seven, girls at Oakside had access to powerful discourses around competence in PE. Many of these girls engaged in technologies of the self by choosing to engage with these discourses over others, such as those of femininity. In doing so, they were better able to negotiate the tensions between being a girl and being in the top set in PE. In contrast, for boys and girls in the bottom set, the enactment of setting policy shaped and supported their perception that they were low ability in PE. This perception varied among pupils in the study. Some pupils were unconcerned about being in the bottom set in PE because the subject was not related to their career aspirations. Some of the girls were also content with being in the bottom set because it accorded with traditional gender expectations and meant that they were less stigmatised than girls in the top set in PE. Most of the boys in the bottom set reported strong feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and disillusionment in PE. They were drawing on discourses of masculinity to highlight the problems of being a boy and being in the bottom set in PE. Like the girls, some of the boys developed strategies to negotiate gendered power relations to create a sense of subjectivity. These strategies included acting aggressively and competitively in PE, and investing energy in other, more rewarding subjects to develop a positive sense of self. The feelings experienced by most of the boys in the bottom set were further compounded by the belief that they were unable to move sets in PE. They explained that the lack of opportunities to move to a different set had caused them to give up and disengage from PE. Marks (2012, p. 129) explains that "this sense of futility is concerning, having the implication of pupils believing that effort could not make a difference" to their set

placement in PE. These findings are worrying given that research has demonstrated that a diminished sense of ability in PE can impact on the willingness and enthusiasm of pupils to participate in sport and physical activity opportunities outside of PE (Sallis & McKenzie, 1991; Wallhead & Buckworth, 2004; Kirk, 2005).

The scope of the study

The conclusions drawn from this study are limited in scope to three mixed-gender secondary schools in one LEA in the North East of England. The schools contrasted in relation to size, specialisation, intake, Ofsted inspection rating, and level of setting. When drawing conclusions from the findings it is important that readers understand that contextual factors are significant in the processes of policy interpretation, translation, and enactment in schools. The evidence from this study cannot therefore be taken as applying in any straight-forward sense to other schools in England or elsewhere. Nonetheless, the findings may resonate with readers' experiences of policy in other school contexts. I encourage readers to take into consideration differences between the schools involved in this study and their own school when reflecting on the findings, and to also consider differences in the wider education policy context.

There were also some aspects of the data that I would have liked to write more about, but for reasons of scope and space, decided not to. In particular, I did not have the space to fully explore the interpretation, enactment, and impact of mixed-ability grouping in girls' PE at Burnway. Mixed-ability grouping was not the focus of this study but emerged as an important issue in interviews with PE teachers at Burnway. In this regard, although I included some discussion of the gendered dimensions of grouping policies in PE, I was only able to scratch

the surface of this issue. I also conducted interviews and focus groups with seven PE teachers and nineteen pupils in a secondary school using mixed-ability grouping in boys' and girls' PE. My intention was to use this school to compare how different grouping policies are interpreted and enacted by PE teachers and how they impact on pupils and their subjectivities in PE. I decided not to include this data in the study because I felt that I did not have the time or the space to fully explore the complexities of both mixed-ability grouping and setting in PE.

Virtues and limitations of the theoretical framework

The study makes a theoretical contribution to the literature by drawing together the major ideas of Foucault and insights from education policy sociology, including Ball's work on performativity, and Ball, Maguire, and Braun's work on policy enactment in schools. This approach enabled exploration and critique of the sense-making of PE teachers, the contextual features shaping the enactment of setting policy in PE, and the impact of the enactment of setting policy on pupils and their subjectivities in PE. The application of Foucault, Ball, Braun, and Maguire's ideas challenged the technical rationality that is often associated with studies of policy implementation. PE teachers were conceptualised as actors with agency to interpret and enact policies in multiple and various ways in PE. Foucault and Ball's ideas also enabled an examination of the accommodations and conflicts that inflect and mediate policy, including power relations and discourses of PE, neoliberal ideals of marketisation, and PE teachers' values and beliefs about teaching and learning, as well as the complex interrelation between these factors.

There are limitations to the theoretical approach employed in this study. Evans *et al*. (1994) suggest that a Foucauldian perspective provides little insight into the complexities of policy, especially the factors that influence and help construct education policy. A Foucauldian analysis of policy also leaves little space for engaging with the structural dimensions, inequalities, and inequities that are inherent in policies and their enactment in schools (Ball *et al*., 2011a, 2012b; Mulcahy, 2016). Ball, Braun, and Maguire's work was employed in part to counter this, with the dimensions of context in enactment theory speaking to and locating teachers within broader structures of education. The enactment perspective provided a way of understanding the complex dynamic between structures, contexts, and individuals' readings and responses to policy and the material dimensions, including staffing, budgets, and school buildings, that mediate the policy process in schools. Ball, Braun, and Maguire's theoretical and empirical work is not without limitations. The articulation of different sorts of policy actors or positions described by Ball *et al*. (2011a, 2011b) brings to the fore differences in teachers' responses to policy. Their work has little to say about the ways in which pupils are both positioned by policy and position themselves in relation to policy or the range of descriptors that emerge for the various actor roles or positions that pupils might adopt in responding to policy. As indicated above, findings demonstrated that pupils are not docile actors, but rather are able and willing to challenge teachers and their practices in PE. As was reported in Chapter Seven, some pupils felt a sense of agency in their ability to impact the decision making of teachers and other pupils used their agency to challenge PE teachers' conceptions of their ability and their set placement in PE. There is very little theorising and research centring on pupils' responses to education policy, and in this regard, the study has provided an arguably important foundation for further work.

Implications for research

The findings of this study highlight several key areas for future research. One of the key findings of this study was the significance of different types of contextual factors, including school reputation, school buildings, and teachers' biographies, as constraints and pressures as well as enablers of policy enactment in PE. These factors need to be considered in future research in order to make better sense of policy enactments in schools and in PE. Ball *et al*. (2012a) remind us that policies are "enacted in particular and distinct institutional contexts with their own histories, resource sets, staffing, and intakes" (p. 109). They are also enacted by assemblages of people with various motivations, philosophies, and practices (Ball *et al*., 2011a, 2012a; Maguire *et al*., 2015). This study focussed exclusively on PE teachers and Year 9 pupils in three mixed-gender, LEA maintained secondary schools in the North East of England. It would be useful, therefore, for future research to consider the interpretation and enactment of setting policy in other types of schools and from the perspectives of other stakeholders, including the head teacher and the senior leadership team. There are a range of different types of schools in England, including community schools, grammar schools, independent schools, and academy schools. Independent schools and academy schools are exempt from LEA regulations. It would also be interesting to find out how head teachers, the senior leadership team, and PE teachers in these schools engage with the policy of setting because they may have more space for policy autonomy. It was beyond the scope of this study to explore the perspectives of the head teacher and the senior leadership team on policy in PE. It is important for future research to examine how head teachers and the senior leadership team respond to the policy of setting because they are typically the "conduits for and interpreters of policy texts in schools" (Ball *et al*., 2011c, p. 9). Such research would extend understandings of the interpretational work of different policy actors in schools, the responses of those operating at different stages or points in the policy process in schools, and the different ways in which the policy of setting is interpreted, translated, and enacted in schools.

The findings from the study indicate that enduring pressures, including market pressures and the burden of raising standards, impacted on PE teachers' decisions about how pupils were organised in PE. PE teachers also suggested that the senior leadership team, Ofsted, and the LEA expected them to enact a policy of setting in PE. This raises questions about how schools and PE teachers retain a policy of mixed-ability grouping in PE. There continues to be a paucity of research that demonstrates how discourses of setting, ability, and mixed-ability grouping are taken up, resisted, and/or negotiated in schools with a policy of mixed-ability grouping in PE. There is also little research on the impact of the policy on pupils in PE and the possibilities for agency and resistance. This is a particularly important area for future research because setting was a great source of anxiety, frustration, and embarrassment for many pupils in this study. In the absence of data, it is unclear how the enactment of mixed-ability grouping impacts on pupils, their agency, and their subjectivities in PE.

Research is also needed to better comprehend the intricacies and nuances of setting and mixed-ability grouping in PE. The findings from this study highlight that a variety of practices operate in the contexts of setting and mixed-ability grouping in PE, including within-class ability grouping and grouping based on friendships and behaviour. They also demonstrate that different grouping strategies are used concurrently in PE lessons. Pupils were grouped by ability within sets in all three case study schools and girls were grouped by ability within mixed-ability groups at Burnway. These patterns are consistent with previous studies of mixed-ability grouping and setting in mathematics, English, and science (Bailey & Bridges, 1983; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Hallam *et al*., 2004b; Marks, 2012, 2013; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a, 2013b). The enactment and implications of these grouping strategies for pupils and their

subjectivities are underexplored in the PE literature. Such research would provide valuable and much needed insight into the less formalised ways pupils are grouped in PE and inform a more holistic understanding of ability grouping policies and practices in PE.

Implications for practice

I should be clear that I am not criticising PE teachers for the negative impacts of setting on some pupils in PE. My concern lies with the inequities that arise from the use of setting in PE and how they might be challenged and changed. I recognise that this is not an easy task because schools and PE teachers face multiple and often conflicting pressures. Schools are crowded policy spaces where teachers are under pressure to raise attainment levels, while trying to accommodate various other policies relating to equity, diversity, and equal opportunities (Houlihan, 2000; Ball *et al*., 2012a; Stylianou *et al*., 2019). Marks (2012, p. 253) explains that "the forces acting against change are multiple, being both external and internal – to the schools and teachers – and complexly interwoven". It was clear in this study that PE teachers were interpreting and enacting the policy of setting in relation to performative ideals and expectations. This led them to teach in ways that were not necessarily of their own choosing. Nonetheless, there were also examples of PE teachers exercising agency by choosing to enact the policy of setting in ways that were consistent with their personal philosophy of teaching. This included the use of within-class ability grouping, which was enacted to address some of the negative aspects of setting in PE. In this regard, although there are difficulties, opportunities exist for PE teachers to think about and do things differently in PE.

PE teachers need to reflect critically on dominant discourses of ability and their impact on how they interpret and enact the policy of setting in PE. The findings of this study provide support for the view that narrow conceptualisation of ability remain an important source of inequity and disadvantage in PE (Evans, 2004; Hunter, 2004; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a, 2010b; Wilkinson *et al*., 2013; Tidén *et al*., 2017). They also suggest that dominant discourses of ability leave little space for diverse thoughts and practices, including mixed-ability grouping. The way in which ability was conceived of and applied in the setting decisions of PE teachers was notably narrow. PE teachers tended to set pupils based on their physical ability, behaviour, and/or attitude in PE. There was also evidence that movement between sets was limited by PE teachers' understandings of ability. This had implications for pupils' access to educational opportunities within and beyond PE. For example, as reported in Chapter Seven, many pupils were placed in the bottom set, and were therefore unable to take GCSE PE or go on school trips, because their abilities were marginalised and disregarded in the setting decisions of PE teachers. It is important that PE teachers recognise this fact and develop strategies that are more inclusive of pupils' diverse abilities in PE. This would enable more pupils to be recognised and considered able in PE.

A possible starting point is to seek alternative discourses, particularly on equity and diversity, to initiate new thinking about notions of ability in PE. This will not be easy because there is little evidence that curriculum reforms are embedding requirements that actively extend notions of ability in PE. A feature of the most recent NCPE is a continued emphasis on physical competence and excellence in competitive team sports. In this regard, policy texts are largely contributing to an ongoing dominance of sport discourses as the prime point of reference for teachers in PE. PE teachers therefore need to be supported in reflecting on the impact of dominant discourses of ability in PE. I agree with Croston (2014, p. 210), who suggests that

"this could be facilitated by integrating related knowledge into teacher training and additional professional development which may serve to enhance teachers' confidence in utilising wider notions of ability within their schools" (p. 210). Teachers could also work collaboratively to develop more practical examples of curriculum structures and teaching practices that allow for the expression of a greater range of abilities in PE.

Most teachers in this study spoke of their desire or commitment to experiment with practices in PE but felt limited in their actions because of a perceived lack of time, a lack of support from the senior leadership team, feelings of isolation, and pressures to raise standards of achievement. Like other researchers in PE (Wright, 1995; Evans, 2004; Hills, 2006; Garrett & Wrench, 2008; Hay & Macdonald, 2010a), I therefore argue that PE teachers need to be provided with enough opportunities and support to interrogate the "practices they are led to believe are right or which are expected of them through policy dictation" (Marks, 2012, p. 271). This could be in the form of continuous professional development [CPD], conversations with peers, and/or working with peers to do things differently. PE teachers also need to be provided with opportunities and support to confront their own beliefs and expectations about teaching and learning to critically examine how they impact on their interpretation and enactment of policy in PE (Hills, 2006; Garrett & Wrench, 2008; Hay & Macdonald, 2010b). These recommendations have time and resource implications. They require the support and commitment of multiple stakeholders, including the LEA, the head teacher, and the senior leadership team. The research community also has an important role to play in terms of making teachers aware of evidence on setting in PE. This awareness could be raised by conferences or school visits. As shown in Chapters Five and Six, a few PE teachers were aware of research on setting and this led them to adopt more evidence-based approaches to its enactment in PE.

Reflecting on the study

I conclude this chapter with a brief confessional tale about the trials and tribulations of conducting this study. My intention is to highlight to the reader that this study was a social, political, and challenging construction. I draw on aspects of my theoretical framework to consider how issues of power and performativity impacted on my ability to complete this study in a timely manner and further acknowledge the messiness of the research process. I conducted this study part time over a five-year period. During this time, I have also taught at Northumbria University. I found it extremely difficult to perform these roles together and felt that I was constantly negotiating power relations. For example, my job at Northumbria was contingent on the timely completion of this study. I have also felt performative pressures to publish research and enhance my teaching. In this regard, like PE teachers in the study, I have had to negotiate multiple policy demands. These demands created significant time pressures and limited my ability to expedite the data collection process. For example, I found it difficult to find time to organise meetings with PE HoDs to discuss the study. There were also times when I had to re-arrange interviews and focus groups because I had to attend staff training or meet with external examiners. It was difficult, therefore, to manage relationships with PE teachers and pupils in the three case study schools. Nonetheless, the PE teachers seemed to be experiencing similar performative pressures. There were times when they asked to rearrange interviews because they were too busy with administrative duties or attending meetings with the senior leadership team. Ironically, this appeared to create a sense of shared experience and worked to develop rapport between PE teachers and myself. This study has also been a journey of discovery. I have developed my understanding of different paradigmatic positions, theoretical perspectives, and approaches to collecting and analysing data. I also have a greater appreciation of the complexities of policy processes in PE. This has stimulated in me a desire to learn more about

the interpretation, enactment, and impact of a range of grouping policies, including mixed-ability grouping and within-class ability grouping, in PE in range of schools in England. These are topics that I intend to pursue in future work.

To establish the feasibility of this study it was necessary to conduct a preliminary study of setting practices in PE (see Chapter Four). I felt that it was important to discover if setting was used in PE before proceeding with other areas of investigation. The preliminary study, however, impacted on the time available to work on different aspects of this study. In this regard, most of the chapters were constructed simultaneously. For example, as I was writing the literature review and methodology chapters, I was also collecting data. This created difficulties as I struggled with my evolving thoughts. The fields I was trying to connect with were moving at the same time as I was conducting this study. Some of the work that would have provided a stronger frame from the outset was therefore not written when I first started collecting data. I did not start off with Ball, Maguire, and Braun's work on policy enactment, but this came through later in the study. I was making strong connections between the data I was collecting and the research I was reading at the time. While I have presented this thesis linearly in a clean, sequential manner, it was very much an iterative process.

Appendix 1: Summary of key terms relating to ability grouping

Setting: Setting is a system of grouping pupils in relation to their perceived ability and/or prior attainment in a single subject (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 2001). A corollary of this approach is that pupils can be taught in different sets for different subjects. For example, where sets are serially ordered (i.e. set 1, set 2, set 3), a pupil may be in a higher-ranking set for some subjects, and a lower-ranking set for others. Sets can also exist in parallel. Parallel sets are equivalent insofar as they contain pupils of a similar, rather than differing, ability levels. In practice, there may be situations where parallel sets and serially ordered sets are used in combination. As Ireson and Hallam (2001, p. 11) note, "to avoid having a bottom set a school might have one top set and two parallel lower sets". Hence, by definition, parallel sets only exist if they are used concurrently with serial sets. Lastly, setting may be used across a year group, within ability bands (I discuss these below), or across timetable halves (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Ireson *et al*., 2002a).

Streaming: Streaming (tracking in the US) is a method of grouping in which pupils are divided into classes based on a measure of their general ability and/or attainment (Hallam & Parsons, 2013a, 2013b). Streaming differs from setting in two major aspects. First, in streams, teaching groups are selected based on pupils' general rather than subject-specific abilities and/or levels of attainment (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). Second, while sets are implemented on a subject-by-subject basis, in streamed settings, pupils are taught in the same stream for most, if not all, of their classes (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Macqueen, 2013b). Streaming is, therefore, intrinsically less flexible than setting.

Banding: A similar practice to streaming is banding. Banding and streaming are similar in the sense that pupils are assigned to groups according to a general measure of ability. However, banding is a less restrictive and differentiated form of streaming (Ireson *et al*., 2002a; Dracup, 2014). As Ireson and Hallam (1999, p. 344) explain, "banding introduces flexibility by restricting the number of streams to two of three, so that each band contains a moderate range of ability". That is, the spread of pupil ability (usually the middle 50%, top 25%, and bottom 25%) in bands is broader than in streams (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Each band contains more than one class group and, accordingly, pupils may be organised in mixed-ability classes and/or regrouped into sets within a band (Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Ireson *et al*., 2002a).

Mixed-ability grouping: In comparison to sets, streams, and bands, mixed-ability groups include pupils of widely ranging abilities (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). Generally, pupils are not assigned to mixed-ability groups based on their ability. Instead, as Gillard (2008, para. 1) explains, mixed-ability groups "contain the full spread of ability in the year group and are intended to be as equal as possible". This means that no class should contain a disproportionate number of pupils who are either high ability or low ability. Practically, this 'spread of ability' may be achieved in several ways. Pupils may be grouped on a random basis, with no account taken of their ability (Esposito, 1973; Gillard, 2008). An example of random grouping is allocating pupils to groups in alphabetical order by their surnames. Pupils may also be grouped purposefully to achieve, for instance, a mix of gender composition (Ireson *et al*., 2002a). The spread of ability in each mixed-ability class will depend on the ability range of the school population. At the simplest level, this means that in different schools, mixed-ability groups will contain pupils with a broader or narrower range of ability.

Appendix 2a: Letter to PE teachers

Research study in secondary school PE.

Dear staff members:

My name is Shaun D. Wilkinson. I am a Lecturer in the Department of Sport Development with Coaching at Northumbria University. In addition to lecturing, I am currently completing my PhD. As a lecturer and an ex secondary school PE teacher, I have considerable experience of working and researching within a secondary PE setting. I would like to investigate why you use setting in PE, how you construct these sets and what you see as some of the benefits and/or disadvantages of setting in PE. In this regard, I am writing to ask for your permission to participate in one 'one to one' interview. I hope that my study will help to improve setting in PE for teachers and pupils.

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

• Your will participate in **one 'one to one' interview** of approximately 45 minutes with me.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. All information collected, and any voice recordings made, will be kept private and confidential. Your name and the name of the school will not be used in the report. Data files will be kept on a password protected computer that only I will have access to.

I would be very grateful if you would agree to participate in my study by signing the consent form. If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail [s.d.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk] or by phone [0191 243 7024/07732594782].

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Shaun

Appendix 2b: Participant information sheet

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences

Project title: Setting in secondary school PE: A study of justifications and set placements.

Principal investigator: Shaun D. Wilkinson

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide you with sufficient information so that you can then give your informed consent. It is thus very important that you read this document carefully and raise any issues that you do not understand with the investigator.

1. What is the purpose of the project?
The aim of this study is to investigate why you use setting in PE, the criteria you use to construct sets, and how you distinguish between pupils of different ability in PE.

2. Why have I been selected to take part?
You have been selected to take part as you are a PE Head of Department/PE Teacher at a school in the North East of England that uses setting in PE.

3. What will I have to do?
Should you give your consent to participate in the research study you are required to complete one semi-structured interview of approximately 45 minutes. The focus of the semi-structured interviews will be how sets are constructed in PE, the criteria used to allocate pupils to sets in PE, and why setting is used in PE in your school. The interviews will take place at a time and place most suitable for you.

4. What is the exclusion criteria (i.e. are there any reasons why I should not take part)?
You should not take part in this study if you are not a Head of PE/PE teacher in a school in the North East of England. You should also not take part in this study if setting is not used to teach PE in your school.

5. Will my participation involve any physical discomfort?
This study does not involve any physical discomfort.

6. Will my participation involve any psychological discomfort or embarrassment?
No.

7. How will confidentiality be assured?
Consent forms containing your name will be completed before the research study commences, however, the names and information provided on the consent forms will be kept separate from the data collected using participant identification numbers. In the research study you and the school will be referred to and identified through use of pseudonyms. Similarly, neither you nor the school will be identifiable in any published material resulting from the research.

9. Who will have access to the information that I provide?

The principal investigator and research team will have access to the information you provide.

10. How will my information be stored / used in the future?
The research data collected will be stored securely and remain in its original format and no alterations will be made from the original source. The general findings from the study may be published in a journal or presented at a conference. However, if any of the data you provide is used you will be referred to under a pseudonym to preserve your anonymity.

11. Has this investigation received appropriate ethical clearance?
Yes, through the School of Health and Life Sciences ethics review process.

12. Will I receive any financial rewards / travel expenses for taking part?
No.

13. How can I withdraw from the project?
You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time. To do this, you should contact the principle investigator via the contact details provided and state that you no longer wish to take part in this research study - you do not need to provide reasons for your withdrawal and no questions will be asked.

Contact Name: Shaun D. Wilkinson
Contact E-mail: s.d.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk

14. If I require further information who should I contact and how?
You can contact:

The Principal Investigator:
Principal Investigator Contact Name: Shaun D. Wilkinson
Principal Investigator Contact E-mail: s.d.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk

Or
The Chair of the Ethics Committee:
Chair of the Ethics Committee Contact Name: Dr Les Ansley
Chair of the Ethics Committee Contact E-mail: les.ansley@northumbria.ac.uk

Appendix 2c: Informed consent form

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences

Project title: Setting in secondary school PE: A study of justifications and set placements.

Principal investigator: Shaun D. Wilkinson

Participant number: _____

	please tick where applicable
I have carefully read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.	☐
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study and I have received satisfactory answers.	☐
I understand I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason for withdrawing, and without prejudice.	☐
I agree to take part in this study.	☐
I agree to information from my interview being accessed for research purposes (all personal information will remain anonymous)	☐
I would like to receive feedback on the overall results of the study at the email address given below. Email address……	☐

Signature of participant..... Date.....……. (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....…….
Signature of researcher..... Date.....……. (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....…….

FOR USE WHEN VIDEO/TAPE RECORDINGS WILL BE TAKEN

Setting in secondary school PE: A study of justifications and set placements.

Principal investigator: Shaun D. Wilkinson

Participant number:

I hereby confirm that I give consent for the following recordings to be made:

Recording	**Purpose**	**Consent**
Voice recordings	Voice recordings are required for the interviews taking place	

Clause A: I understand that the recording(s) may also be used for teaching/research purposes and may be presented to pupils/researchers in an educational/research context. My name or other personal information will never be associated with the recording(s).

Tick the box to indicate your consent to Clause A ☐

Clause B: I understand that the recording(s) may be published in an appropriate journal/textbook or on an appropriate Northumbria University webpage. My name or other personal information will never be associated with the recording(s). I understand that I have the right to withdraw consent at any time prior to publication, but that once the recording(s) are in the public domain there may be no opportunity for the effective withdrawal of consent.

Tick the box to indicate your consent to Clause B ☐

Signature of participant..... Date.....……..

Signature of researcher..... Date.....……..

Appendix 2d: Participant debrief sheet

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences

Project title: Setting in secondary school PE: A study of justifications and set placements.

Principal investigator: Shaun D. Wilkinson

1. What was the purpose of the project?
The aim of this study was to investigate why you use setting in PE, the criteria you use to construct these sets, and how you distinguish between pupils of different ability in PE.

2. How will I find out about the results?
If you wish to receive the general results of the research study you should contact:
The Principal Investigator:
Principal Investigator Contact Name: Shaun D. Wilkinson
Principal Investigator Contact E-mail: s.d.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk

3. What will happen to the information I have provided?
All information collected from each participant within this research study will be analysed together as a single set of data. Once the analysis process has been completed the raw data collected will be managed in line with the Data Protection Act (1998). The general findings from the study may be published in a journal or presented at a conference. However, you will not be named and neither will your school.

4. Will I receive individual Feedback?
No individual feedback will be provided.

5. Have I been deceived in any way during the project?
No.

6. If I change my mind and wish to withdraw the information I have provided, how do I do this?
You have the right and opportunity to withdraw from this study at any time. To do this, you should contact the principle investigator via the contact details provided and state that you no longer wish to take part in this research study - you do not need/have to provide reasons for your withdrawal and no questions will be asked.

Contact Name: Shaun D. Wilkinson
Contact E-mail: s.d.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or worries concerning the way in which this research has been conducted, or if you have requested, but did not receive feedback from the researcher concerning the general outcomes of the study within a few months after the study has concluded, then please contact Les Ansley via email at les.ansley@northumbria.ac.uk

Appendix 3a: Letter to pupils

Research study in secondary school PE.

Hello ☺

My name is **Shaun D. Wilkinson**. I am a teacher at Northumbria University in Newcastle. I also used to be a secondary school PE teacher. I am interested in finding out about what you like and do not like about **grouping** in PE lessons.

I am writing you this letter to ask if you would be willing to help with my study, and to tell you a little bit more about what would happen if you would like to take part.

If you would like to take part:

- You will take part in one focus group discussion of about 45 minutes. What this means is that I will sit down and talk with you and some of your friends who are in the same PE class as you.
- The focus group discussion will be voice recorded to help me remember what was said. My memory isn't what it used to be. I will not video record the focus group discussion.
- I will ask you questions about grouping in your PE lessons.

This will help me write a report about how you experience grouping in PE. I hope that my report will improve your experiences of grouping in PE. I will not use your real name in my report, instead I will use a made-up name so anyone reading the report will not know I am talking about you.

You do not have to take part if you don't want to. If you think you would like to take part, and then change your mind, that is fine. All you will need to do is tell me that you don't want to take part anymore. I will not ask you any questions about why you have changed your mind.

If you have read the letter and have any worries or questions, please do not hesitate to talk to me or your parents.

If you would like to take part, please sign the permission letter together with your parent/guardian.

Thank you for reading my letter ☺

Shaun.

Appendix 3b: Letter to parents

Research study in secondary school PE.

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Shaun D. Wilkinson. I am a Lecturer in the Department of Sport Development with Coaching at Northumbria University. In addition to lecturing, I am currently completing my PhD. As a lecturer and an ex PE teacher, I have considerable experience of working and researching within a secondary PE setting. I am particularly interested in pupils' experiences of PE, and as such I believe that it is important to involve pupils in the research process. In this regard, your child has been invited to join a research study to look at their experiences of grouping in PE. As part of this I am writing to ask for your permission for your child to participate in one focus group discussion with other pupils in the school who have agreed to participate in this study. The decision to let you child join, or not to join, is up to you and your child. This work will provide an opportunity for your child to discuss and reflect on their experiences of PE, and to share some of those experiences with other pupils in the school. I hope that my study will help to improve grouping in PE for teachers and pupils.

If you agree for your child to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

• Your child will participate in **one focus group discussion** of approximately 45 minutes, with four or five other pupils in their year group who have agreed to participate in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your child from the study at any time. There will be no consequences if you choose for your child not to participate in the study. All information collected, and any voice recordings made, will be kept private and confidential. Your child's real name and the name of the school will not be used in the report. Data files will be kept on a password protected computer that only I will have access to. If you would like further details on the study I would be happy to email you a participant information form.

I would be very grateful if you would allow your child to participate in my study. If you agree that your child can take part in my project, please return a signed copy of this form to the Head of PE as soon as possible.

If you have any questions about my plans, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail [s.d.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk] or by phone [0191 243 7024/07732594782].

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Shaun.

Appendix 3c: Participant information sheet

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences

Project title: The experience of setting in secondary school PE

Principal investigator: Shaun D. Wilkinson

Your son/daughter is invited to take part in this research study. Before you decide if he or she should take part it is important for you to read this leaflet, so you understand why the study is being carried out and what it will involve.

1. What is the purpose of the project?
The aim of this study is to investigate pupils' perceptions and experiences of setting in secondary school PE.

2. Why have I been selected to take part?
Your child had been selected to take part in this study as they attend a secondary school in the North East of England and they experience PE in sets. Your child should not take part in this study if they do not attend a secondary school and have not experienced PE in sets.

3. Do I have to take part?
Your child does not have to take part in the study. The decision to let you child join, or not to join, is up to you and your child. You also have the right to withdraw your child from this study at any time. To do this, you should contact the principle investigator via the contact details provided and state that you no longer wish for your child to take part in this research study. You do not have to give any reason why.

4. What happens if I take part?
Should you give your consent for your child to participate in the research study they are required to participate in one focus group discussion and one 'one to one' interview. They will last approximately 45 minutes and will focus particularly on your child's experiences of setting in PE.

5. What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?
There are no disadvantages of your child taking part in the study.

6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?
This work will provide an opportunity for your child to discuss and reflect on their experiences of PE, and to share some of those experiences with other pupils in the school. I hope that my study will help to improve setting in PE for teachers and pupils.

7. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential and anonymous?
Consent forms containing you and your child's name will be completed before the research study commences, however, the names and information provided on the consent forms will be kept separate from the data collected using participant identification numbers. In the research study, your child and the school will be referred to and identified through use of pseudonyms. Similarly, neither your child nor the school will be identifiable in any published material resulting from the research.

9. How will my data be stored?
All information collected from each participant within this research study will be analysed together as a single set of data. Once the analysis process has been completed the raw data collected will be managed in line with the Data Protection Act (1998). Specifically, the research data collected will be stored securely on a password protected lap top and remain in its original format and no alterations will be made from the original source. Only the principal investigator and research team will have access to the information your child provides.

10. Who is organising and funding the study?
Northumbria University.

11. What will happen to the results of the study?
The general findings from the study may be published in a journal or presented at a conference. However, if any of the data your child provided is used they will be referred to under a pseudonym to preserve their anonymity.

12. Who has reviewed this study?
This investigation has received appropriate ethical clearance from the School of Health and Life Sciences ethics review process.

13. If I require further information who should I contact and how?
You can contact:

The Principal Investigator:
Principal Investigator Contact Name: Shaun D. Wilkinson
Principal Investigator Contact E-mail: s.d.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk

Or
The Chair of the Ethics Committee:
Chair of the Ethics Committee Contact Name: Dr Mic Wilkinson
Chair of the Ethics Committee Contact E-mail: mic.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk

Appendix 3d: Informed consent form

Project title: The experience of setting in secondary school PE

Principal investigator: Shaun D. Wilkinson

Participant number:

	please tick where applicable
I confirm I have read and understood the letter for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	☐
I understand my child's participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw them at any time without reason.	☐
I understand that my child will take part in one focus group discussion of approximately 45 minutes.	☐
I understand that while the information gained in this study may be published, my child will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.	☐
I understand that whether my child participates or not, or withdraws after participating, will have no effect on his/her progress in his/her course of study, or results gained.	☐
I agree that my child can take part in this study.	☐

I would like to receive feedback on the overall results of the study at the email address given below. I understand that I will not receive individual feedback. ☐

Email address……

Signature of child..... Date.....……..   (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....…….
Signature of parent..... Date.....……..   (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....…….
Signature of researcher..... Date.....……..   (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....…….

FOR USE WHEN VIDEO/TAPE RECORDINGS WILL BE TAKEN

The experience of setting in secondary school PE

Principal investigator: Shaun D. Wilkinson

Participant number:

I hereby confirm that I give consent for the following recordings to be made:

Recording	**Purpose**	**Consent**
Voice recordings	Voice recordings are required for the focus group discussion and one to one interviews taking place	

Please tick the consent box above, Clause A and Clause B.

Clause A: I understand that the recording(s) may also be used for teaching/research purposes and may be presented to students/researchers in an educational/research context. The name of yourself, your child or other personal information will never be associated with the recording(s).

Tick the box to indicate your consent to Clause A ☐

Clause B: I understand that the recording(s) may be published in an appropriate journal/textbook or on an appropriate Northumbria University webpage. Your name, the name of your child, or other personal information will never be associated with the recording(s). I understand that I have the right to withdraw consent at any time prior to publication, but that once the recording(s) are in the public domain there may be no opportunity for the effective withdrawal of consent.

Tick the box to indicate your consent to Clause B ☐

Signature of child ..... Date.....……..

Signature of Parent ..... Date.....……..

Signature of researcher..... Date.....……..

Appendix 3e: Participant debrief sheet

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences

Project title: The experience of setting in secondary school PE

Principal investigator: Shaun D. Wilkinson

1. What was the purpose of the project?
The aim of this study was to investigate pupils' perceptions and experiences of setting secondary school PE.

2. How will I find out about the results?
If you would like to receive a general summary of the results please email the researcher on the email address below. A general summary of the results will be available approximately 12 weeks after your son/daughter has taken part in the study.

3. If I change my mind and wish to withdraw the information I have provided, how do I do this?
If you wish to withdraw your son/daughters data then email the investigator named in the information sheet within 1 month of your son/daughter taking part. You only need to provide the code number that was allocated to your son/daughter (this can be found on your debrief sheet) and state that you no longer wish your son/daughter to take part in this research study. You do not have to provide reasons for their withdrawal and no questions will be asked. After this time it might not be possible to withdraw your son/daughters data as it could already have been analysed.

4. If I change my mind and wish to withdraw the information I have provided, how do I do this?
You have the right and opportunity to withdraw your son/daughter from this study at any time. To do this, you should contact the principle investigator via the contact details provided and state that you no longer wish your son/daughter to take part in this research study - you do not /have to provide reasons for their withdrawal and no questions will be asked.

Contact Name: Shaun D. Wilkinson
Contact E-mail: s.d.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or worries concerning the way in which this research has been conducted, or if you have requested, but did not receive feedback from the researcher concerning the general outcomes of the study within a few months after the study has concluded, then please contact Mic Wilkinson via email at mic.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk

Appendix 4: Details of pupil respondents

School	Pupil (Pseudonym)	Girl/ Boy	PE set/ Number of sets	'Academic' set - Terms used by pupils	Moved between PE sets?
Oakside	Josh	Boy	Set 1/3	Middle	No
Oakside	Jack	Boy	Set 1/3	Bottom	No
Oakside	Arthur	Boy	Set 1/3	Top	No
Oakside	Kieran	Boy	Set 1/3	Middle	No
Oakside	Joseph	Boy	Set 1/3	Bottom	No
Oakside	Rebecca	Girl	Set 1/3	Top	No
Oakside	Ellie	Girl	Set 1/3	Middle	No
Oakside	Christina	Girl	Set 1/3	Top	No
Oakside	Harley	Girl	Set 1/3	Bottom	No
Oakside	Emily	Girl	Set 1/3	Bottom	No
Oakside	Dylan	Boy	Set 2/3	Middle	No
Oakside	Connor	Boy	Set 2/3	Top	No
Oakside	Aiden	Boy	Set 2/3	Middle	No
Oakside	Omar	Boy	Set 2/3	Top	No
Oakside	Owen	Boy	Set 2/3	Middle	Yes Set 1-2
Oakside	Jessica	Girl	Set 2/3	Top	Yes Set 1-2
Oakside	Aimee	Girl	Set 2/3	Top	No
Oakside	Sasha	Girl	Set 2/3	Top	No
Oakside	Georgia	Girl	Set 2/3	Middle	Yes Set 1-2
Oakside	Scott	Boy	Set 3/3	Middle	No
Oakside	Ben	Boy	Set 3/3	Top	No
Oakside	Billy	Boy	Set 3/3	Top	No
Oakside	Mitchell	Boy	Set 3/3	Top	No
Oakside	Eleanor	Girl	Set 3/3	Top	No

Oakside	Sibka	Girl	Set 3/3	Middle	No
Oakside	Lola	Girl	Set 3/3	Top	Yes Set 1/2
Oakside	Lauren	Girl	Set 3/3	Top	No
Oakside	Maya	Girl	Set 3/3	Bottom	No
Burnway	Lawrence	Boy	Set 1/2	Bottom	No
Burnway	Sadiq	Boy	Set 1/2	Top	No
Burnway	Oliver	Boy	Set 1/2	Top	No
Burnway	Noah	Boy	Set 1/2	Bottom	No
Burnway	Jacob	Boy	Set 1/2	Top	No
Burnway	Charlie	Boy	Set 2/2	Top	No
Burnway	Riley	Boy	Set 2/2	Bottom	No
Burnway	Ethan	Boy	Set 2/2	Top	No
Burnway	William	Boy	Set 2/2	Bottom	No
Burnway	Lily	Girl	Mixed-ability	Top	N/A
Burnway	Olivia	Girl	Mixed-ability	Top	N/A
Burnway	Amelia	Girl	Mixed-ability	Top	N/A
Burnway	Isla	Girl	Mixed-ability	Bottom	N/A
Burnway	Ava	Girl	Mixed-ability	Top	N/A
Burnway	Mia	Girl	Mixed-ability	Top	N/A
Burnway	Evie	Girl	Mixed-ability	Top	N/A
Burnway	Grace	Girl	Mixed-ability	Bottom	N/A
Burnway	Alice	Girl	Mixed-ability	Bottom	N/A
Sandwest	Samuel	Boy	Set 1/2	Top	Yes Set 2/1
Sandwest	Shaun	Boy	Set 1/2	Bottom	No
Sandwest	Chris	Boy	Set 1/2	Bottom	No
Sandwest	Ellis	Boy	Set 1/2	Middle	No
Sandwest	Melissa	Girl	Set 1/2	Top	No

Sandwest	Nicole	Girl	Set 1/2	Top	No
Sandwest	Morgan	Girl	Set 1/2	Middle	No
Sandwest	Jodie	Girl	Set 1/2	Top	No
Sandwest	Caitlin	Girl	Set 1/2	Top	No
Sandwest	Jamie	Boy	Set 2/2	Middle	No
Sandwest	Ian	Boy	Set 2/2	Bottom	No
Sandwest	Dane	Boy	Set 2/2	Bottom	No
Sandwest	Toby	Boy	Set 2/2	Middle	No
Sandwest	Kate	Girl	Set 2/2	Bottom	No
Sandwest	Kadie	Girl	Set 2/2	Bottom	No
Sandwest	Hannah	Girl	Set 2/2	Bottom	No
Sandwest	Shannon	Girl	Set 2/2	Bottom	No

Appendix 5: Details of the pilot school and respondents

School

School/ Type	Type of school	Age range	Pupils on roll	SES	Gender	Number of year 9 PE sets	Number of PE teachers
Riverdale/ Community	Local authority	11-16	450	Medium SES	Boys & girls	4 (2 boys/ 2 girls)	6 (3 male/ 3 female)

Teachers

School	Practitioner (Pseudonym)	Job title	No. of years teaching	No. of years at school	Year 9 PE Set taught
Riverdale	N/A	Teacher of boys' PE	7	7	Set 1 boys
Riverdale	N/A	Teacher of girls' PE	17	12	Set 2 girls

Pupils

School	Pupil (Pseudonym)	Girl/ Boy	PE set/ Number of sets	'Academic' set - Terms used by pupils	Moved between PE sets?
Riverdale	N/A	Boy	Set 1/2	Bottom	No
Riverdale	N/A	Boy	Set 1/2	Middle	No
Riverdale	N/A	Boy	Set 1/2	Top	No
Riverdale	N/A	Boy	Set 1/2	Bottom	No

Riverdale	N/A	Boy	Set 1/2	Middle	No
Riverdale	N/A	Girl	Set 2/2	Top	No
Riverdale	N/A	Girl	Set 2/2	Bottom	No
Riverdale	N/A	Girl	Set 2/2	Top	No
Riverdale	N/A	Girl	Set 2/2	Top	No
Riverdale	N/A	Girl	Set 2/2	Top	No
Riverdale	N/A	Girl	Set 2/2	Middle	No
Riverdale	N/A	Girl	Set 2/2	Bottom	No

Appendix 6a: Interview guide for PE Teachers

General:

1. How long have you been working as a PE teacher at this school?
2. What do you think is the purpose of school PE?
3. What do you consider the dominant ethos of the PE department?
4. How do you feel PE is valued and/or viewed in the school?

Specialist sports college:

5. How does being a designated specialist sports college impact on the ethos of the PE department? **Repeat:** Teaching PE/Pupils in PE/How PE is viewed in the school/ Setting/Grouping in PE

Grouping of pupils in class groups:

6. What types of pupil grouping does the school use?
7. What grouping practices are adopted for organising PE classes in the school?

Setting in PE:

8. Who decides on grouping policy/decisions in PE? Involvement/Role? Autonomy?
9. What are your thoughts on setting in PE? **Repeat:** Mixed-ability grouping in PE
10. Why do you think some schools avoid using setting/mixed-ability grouping in PE?

Rationale for setting in PE:

11. Why does the PE department use setting for teaching PE?
12. How does the use of setting differ (if at all) for different year groups? **Repeat:** Girls/Boys/ Academic subjects/Core PE/GCSE PE.
13. How many sets are there in each year group? How are these referred to?
14. What are the benefits to setting: For teachers; for pupils in the following groups? **Repeat:** Disadvantages. How do you overcome these? If there are disadvantages why do you continue with the practice?
15. Do you feel that setting is beneficial in particular activity settings? Which ones and why?

Setting and gender (If school uses mixed-ability grouping for girls' PE):

16. Why does the PE department use setting for boys' PE but not girls' PE?

Processes of allocating pupils to sets in PE:

17. How do you decide which set to put different pupils in? E.g. Processes used? Why?
18. What kinds of information do you use to decide which set to put different pupils in? Why?
19. How much trust do you place in this information?
20. What criteria do you consider? Why? Past, current and/or potential ability? What is potential ability? How do you identify this?

Ability:

21. What does ability in PE mean to you? What makes someone able in PE? **Repeat:** Not able. What affects how able someone is at PE?
22. How do you decide/recognise whether someone is able in PE? **Repeat:** Not able.
23. How do you ascertain pupils' achievement level in PE? What sort of things result in lower achievement in PE?
24. Does your opinion of a pupil and their level of ability ever change? How? Would this ever mean that they were moved to a different class group for PE? And does it influence how you 'position' them in lessons?
25. **Movement:** Does anyone change ability groups in PE? When? Why? How (up/down)? Benefits? Problems? Barriers?
26. Do you think that pupils can change and develop their level of ability in PE, How? Why? What facilitates/inhibits pupils extending their ability? How much difference can PE make?
27. How do you cater for and respond to different levels of ability in PE?
28. In what ways is being good at PE different from being good at other subjects? **Repeat:** Similar to other subjects
29. What would you expect a pupil who is good at PE to be like in other subjects? **Repeat:** other subjects in PE

Characteristics of different sets in PE:

30. How would you describe 'higher' set pupils in a typical PE lesson? Similarities?
31. What sort of pupils are in this set (How they learn, behaviour)? What things should they/are they able to do?
32. What are your expectations of the pupils in the 'higher' set? **Repeat:** 'Middle': 'Bottom'.
33. What do you see as the difference between the pupils in the different sets in PE?

Within-class ability grouping in PE:

34. How do you group pupil's within-lessons for teaching PE? I.e. if you split a class up for various activities in a lesson, how do you do this? Why? On what basis? (e.g. girls/boys, friendship groups, try to group pupils of similar abilities, or deliberately create a mix) Does this change (in different activities)? Examples?
35. What (if any) are the benefits to within-class grouping: For teachers; for pupils. **Repeat:** Disadvantages. How do you overcome these?

Permission:

- Do you give permission for the interviewer to contact you in future should a follow up to this interview be required?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix 6b: Interview guide for pupils

Introductory questions:

1. What do you enjoy about PE lessons in school? Why? **Repeat:** Dislike? Why?
2. Compared to other subjects, how important is PE to you? Why? Which subjects are the most important to you? Why?
3. Are you participating in sport/physical activity outside of school? **If yes**, why? What type of activities? **If no**, why not?
4. Are your parents supportive of your involvement in sport/physical activity? **If yes**, why? **If no**, why not? **Repeat:** Other interests?

Defining/improving ability in PE:

5. What do you think ability is? Repeat: In PE?
6. How do you know/judge how able/good you are in PE? Does anyone tell you how good you are? **Repeat:** PE teachers? Other pupils? Other subjects? If different, why?
7. To what extent do you feel you are good at PE? How do you see yourself in relation to others in PE? What sort of things do you think you are good at? Why? Not good at? Repeat: Other subjects? Outside of school? If different, why? PE teachers? Other pupils?
8. What makes you feel good/able in PE? Repeat: Not able?
9. Are there pupils in your year group who are better than others in PE? If yes, why do they have more ability than others in PE? How would you describe their abilities? If no, why not? Repeat: Worse?
10. Does it matter to you whether you are able/good or not at PE? If yes, why? If no, why not?
11. Do you think you can get better at PE? If yes, why? How? If no, why not? **Repeat:** Get worse? If yes, why? How? If no, why not?

Perception of ability - Gendered dimension:

12. Is it ok for you to be a girl/boy who is good at PE? **If yes**, why? **If no**, why not?
13. How would you describe a boy/girl who is good in PE? **Repeat:** Not good? PE teacher?

Perceptions of grouping:

14. How are you grouped for other subjects in the school? How do you feel about this? Why do you think you are grouped in this way? **Repeat:** Not in other ways?

Perceptions of grouping in PE:

15. How do you come to PE? (E.g. Registration, Bands, Streams, Sets). What happens when you get to PE? How are you grouped? Are you grouped by your ability in PE? How do you feel about this?

16. Why do you think you are grouped in this way for PE lessons? **Repeat:** Not in other ways?
17. What is the school ethos and how does this impact on how you are grouped in PE?
18. What do you like about being grouped in this way for PE lessons? **Repeat:** Dislike? PE teachers?
19. Given a free choice, would you prefer PE lessons in sets or in mixed-ability groups? Why? Different activities? **Repeat:** PE teachers? Why? Other pupils? Why?
20. In interviews, PE teachers said that pupils make better progress in sets than in mixed-ability groups. Do you agree? **If yes**, why? **If no**, why not?
21. How (if at all) is grouping different for boys' and girls' PE in the school? Why? **Repeat:** Primary school? If different, why?

Characteristics of different groups in PE:

22. What group are you in for PE lessons? How do you know this? How are these groups referred to? Why are they referred to in this way? How does being in this group make you feel? Does it matter to you what group you in for PE? **If yes**, why? **If no**, why not?
23. What do you like about being in this group for PE? **Repeat:** Dislike?
24. What does being in this group mean about you? **Repeat:** How good you are in PE?
25. Why are you in this group for PE lessons? **Repeat:** Not in others? How would you compare how good you are to other pupils in your group? **Repeat:** The other groups?
26. How would you describe pupils in your group? **Repeat:** Their abilities? Other groups? What are the differences? **Repeat:** Similarities?
27. Are you in the same group in PE as in other subjects? **If yes**, why? **If no**, why not?

Allocation to groups in PE:

28. How do your PE teachers decide which group to put you in? What are you judged on? Why? How do you feel about this? When is this done?
29. **Self-select:** Why do you think PE teachers allow you to self-select your ability group for PE? How do you feel about this? What would be your preference?
30. Why did you decide to put yourself in this group? **Repeat:** Not in the other? How? What did you consider? How involved were your PE teachers?

Movement between groups in PE:

31. Are you always in the same group in PE? **If no**, when does your group change? **Repeat:** How? **If yes**, why? Are you able to move groups in PE? **Repeat**: Up/Down? **If no**, why can't you move groups in PE? Should you be able to move groups in PE? Why?
32. Have any of you changed groups in PE? **If yes**, why did you move? How did you move? When did you move? How did this feel? How has this impacted on how you think about how good you are in PE? **If no**, ask if anyone has moved groups. **Repeat**: Up/Down
33. Are you happy with the group you are in for PE lessons? **If yes**, why? Why do you not want to move groups? **If no**, why not? Why doesn't your teacher move you?
34. How would you feel if you were moved groups in PE? **Repeat:** Up/Down

Experiences/impacts of grouping in PE:

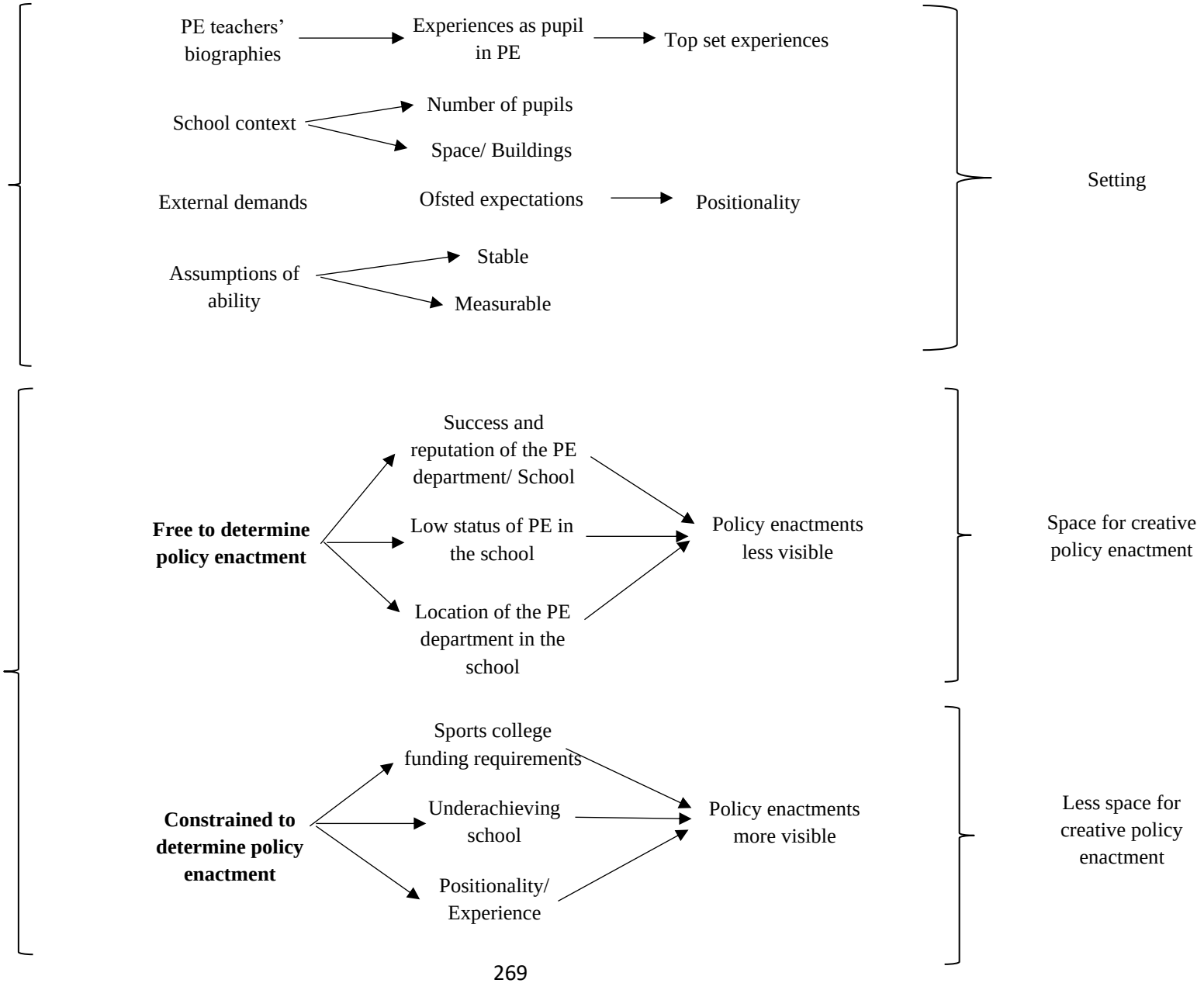
35. How do you feel in PE lessons in your group? Do you always feel this way in PE? When do/might you feel different? How would you feel if you were not in your group in PE lessons? Are these experiences in PE similar or different to other subjects?
36. How does being in your group affect how well you do/can do in PE? (e.g. Progress, Learning, Achievement) Why? **Repeat:** Opportunities to take GCSE PE? Attend extra-curricular clubs? How you feel about yourself? Your ability?

Other forms of grouping in PE:

37. What other types of grouping do you experience in PE lessons? Why? What do you like about this? **Repeat:** Dislike?
38. Are you able to move between these groups in PE? **If no**, why not? **If yes,** when does your group change? **Repeat:** How? How has this impacted on how you think about your ability in PE?
39. How do PE teachers put you in these groups in PE lessons? When is this done? What are you judged on?
40. How do you feel in PE lessons in these groups? How does being in your group affect how well you do/can do in PE? How you feel about yourself? Your ability?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix 7: Data analysis



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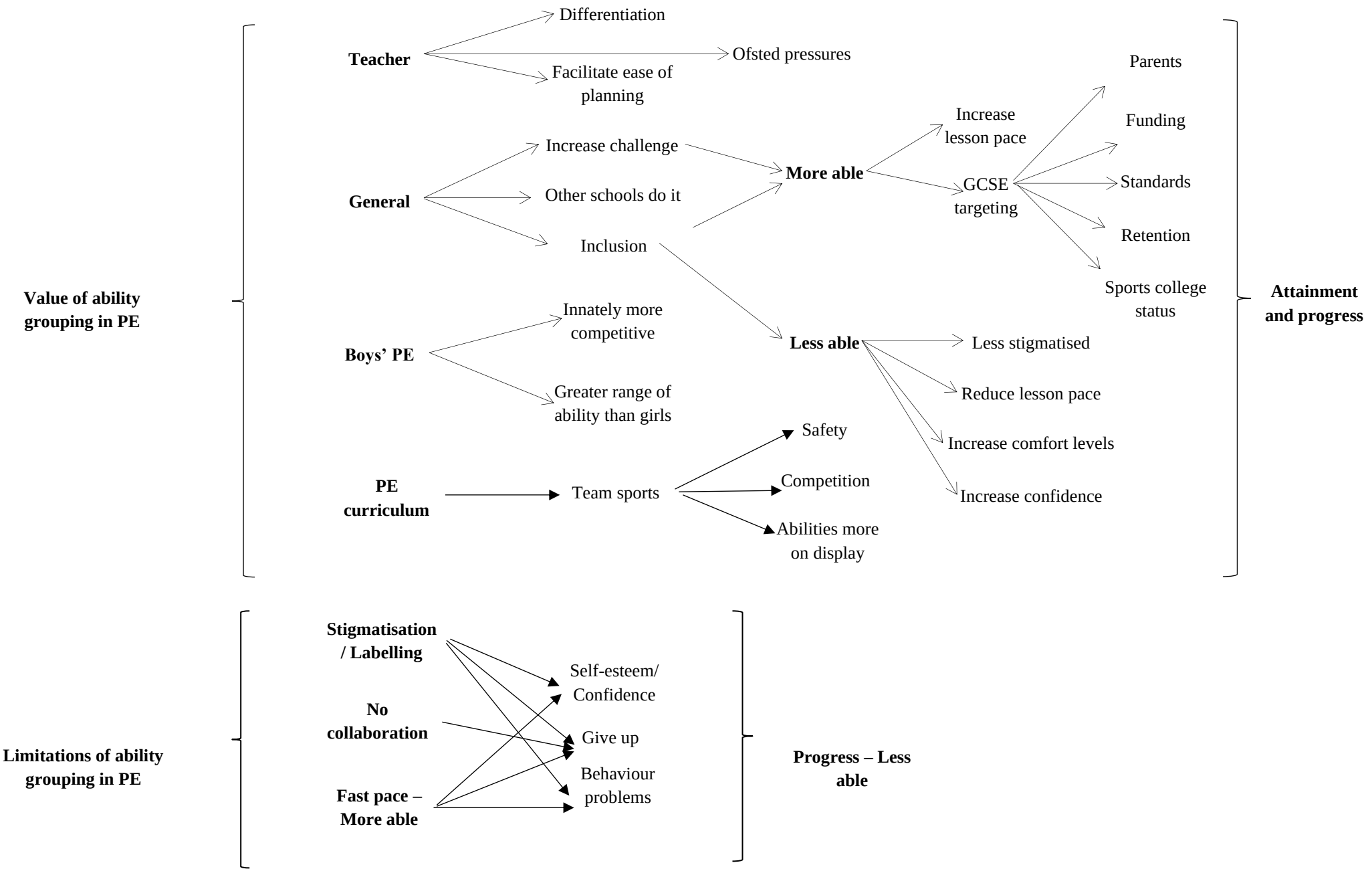
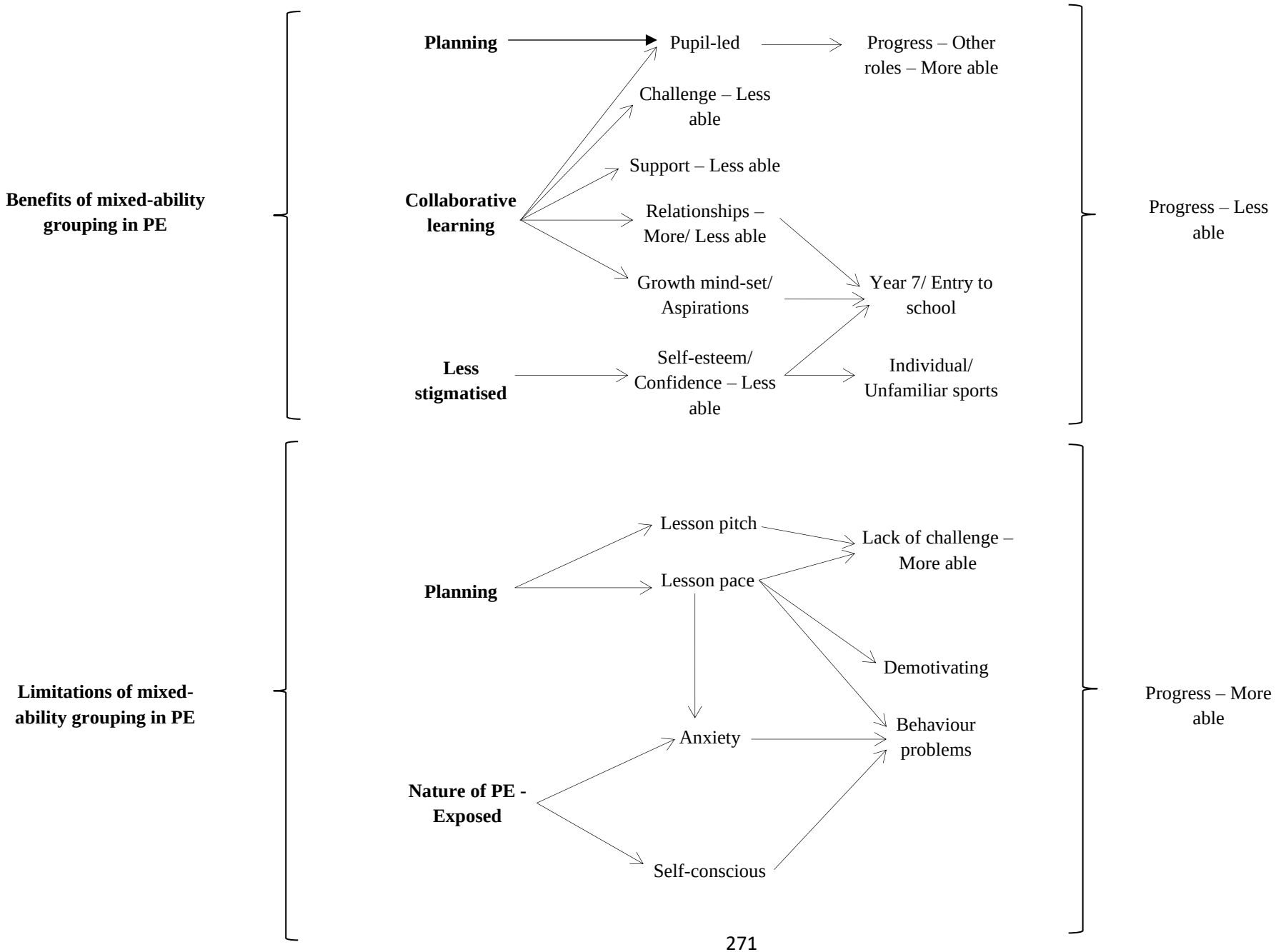
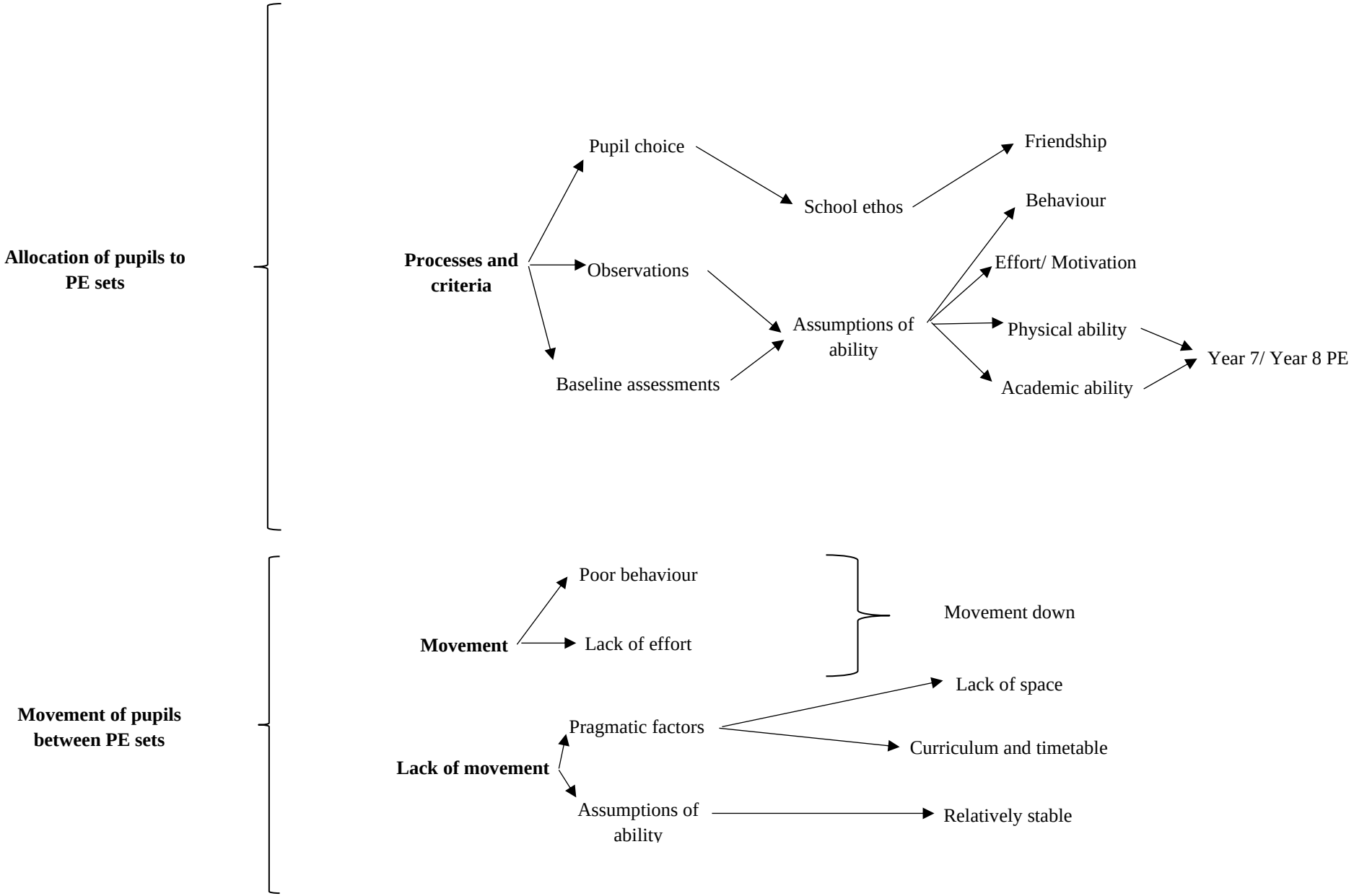
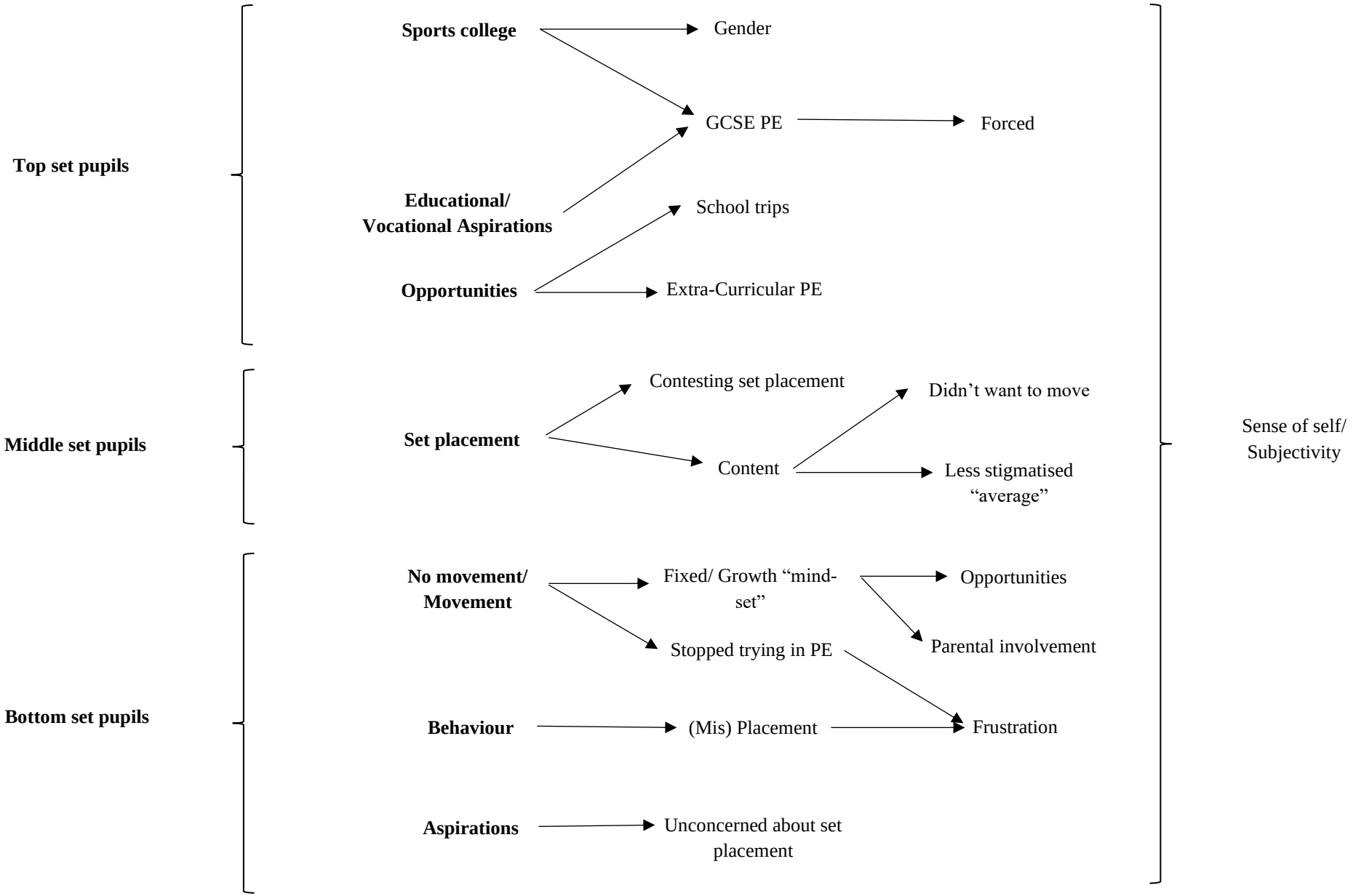

Value of ability grouping in PE
Teacher
Differentiation
Ofsted pressures
Facilitate ease of planning
General
Increase challenge
Other schools do it
Inclusion
More able
Increase lesson pace
GCSE targeting
Parents
Funding
Standards
Retention
Sports college status
Less able
Less stigmatised
Reduce lesson pace
Increase comfort levels
Increase confidence
Boys' PE
Innately more competitive
Greater range of ability than girls
PE curriculum
Team sports
Safety
Competition
Abilities more on display
Attainment and progress
Limitations of ability grouping in PE
Stigmatisation / Labelling
No collaboration
Fast pace – More able
Self-esteem/ Confidence
Give up
Behaviour problems
Progress – Less able


Benefits of mixed-ability grouping in PE
Planning
Pupil-led
Progress – Other roles – More able
Challenge – Less able
Support – Less able
Collaborative learning
Relationships – More/ Less able
Growth mind-set/ Aspirations
Year 7/ Entry to school
Less stigmatised
Self-esteem/ Confidence – Less able
Individual/ Unfamiliar sports
Progress – Less able
Limitations of mixed-ability grouping in PE
Planning
Lesson pitch
Lesson pace
Lack of challenge – More able
Demotivating
Anxiety
Behaviour problems
Nature of PE - Exposed
Self-conscious
Progress – More able


Allocation of pupils to PE sets
Processes and criteria
Pupil choice
Observations
Baseline assessments
School ethos
Assumptions of ability
Friendship
Behaviour
Effort/ Motivation
Physical ability
Academic ability
Year 7/ Year 8 PE
Movement of pupils between PE sets
Movement
Poor behaviour
Lack of effort
Movement down
Lack of movement
Pragmatic factors
Lack of space
Curriculum and timetable
Assumptions of ability
Relatively stable


Top set pupils
Sports college
Gender
GCSE PE
Forced
Educational/ Vocational Aspirations
School trips
Opportunities
Extra-Curricular PE
Middle set pupils
Set placement
Contesting set placement
Didn't want to move
Content
Less stigmatised "average"
Bottom set pupils
No movement/ Movement
Fixed/ Growth "mind-set"
Opportunities
Stopped trying in PE
Parental involvement
Behaviour
(Mis) Placement
Frustration
Aspirations
Unconcerned about set placement
Sense of self/ Subjectivity

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